

A large, abstract watercolor splash in shades of red, orange, and brown, with some green and yellow accents, set against a white background. The splash is irregular and textured, resembling a natural stain or a piece of aged paper.

I M M E R S E

The Bible Reading Experience™

PROPHETS

FAMILY GUIDE

*Almighty God,
Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
grant, we pray,
that we might be grounded and settled
in your truth
by the coming of your Holy Spirit
into our hearts.*

*What we do not know,
reveal to us;
what is lacking within us,
make complete;
that which we do know,
confirm in us;
and keep us blameless in your service,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Amen.

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——— *Welcome to* ———

I M M E R S E

The Bible Reading Experience

Leading a family is arguably one of the most challenging tasks a person can undertake. And since families are the core unit in the church, their growth and development directly impacts the health of the communities where they serve. The *Immerse: Prophets Family Reading Guide* is a resource designed to assist parents, guardians, and other family leaders to guide their families in the transformative Immerse experience.

Planning Your Family Experience

This family guide is essentially an abridged version of *Immerse: Prophets*. So it's an excellent way for young readers in your family to participate in the Immerse experience without becoming overwhelmed. The readings are shorter than the readings in *Immerse: Prophets* and are always drawn from within a single day's reading. This helps everyone in the family to stay together, whether reading from the family guide or the complete *Prophets* volume.

Each daily Bible reading in the family guide is introduced by a short paragraph to orient young readers to what they are about to read. This paragraph will also help to connect the individual daily Scripture passages to the big story revealed in the whole Bible. (This is an excellent tool for helping you guide your family discussions.)

The family guide readings end with a feature called Talking Together, created especially for young readers. These provide reflective statements and questions to help them think more deeply about the Scriptures they have read. (Talking Together is also useful for guiding your family discussions.)

The readings in the family guide are intended primarily for children in grades 4 to 8. Older children may be better suited for reading the full text of *Immerse: Prophets*. (These age suggestions are only provided as a guideline. You know what is most appropriate for your children.)

Sometimes the best way to get everyone on the same page is to read something together aloud. If your family enjoys reading aloud together on a regular basis, that may be the most natural way for you to use the family reading guide. For families that haven't tried this, you may want to experiment with it by reading from this guide. Begin each daily reading with the introductory paragraph to give context, followed immediately by the daily Scripture passage. Then the Talking Together feature can help you lead a family discussion.

And don't forget about the audio and video resources available at ImmerseBible.com. These small group tools could be just what your family needs to stay engaged in the Immerse experience.

Enjoy your journey into Scripture with your family. We hope and pray that this family resource will help you and your family to experience God's word together.

DAY 1

God's Messages to God's People

(from *Prophets*, pages A9-A10)

THE BIBLE TELLS THE STORY of how God chose the people of Israel for the sake of restoring the whole world. He entered into a series of covenants with Abraham and his descendants in order to move them closer and closer to this goal of being a life-giving blessing to all peoples.

But over and over again, the ancient Israelites failed to honor their covenant obligations to God. The Law of Moses insisted that they give the LORD their exclusive allegiance, but they repeatedly turned to worship other gods. The Law provided numerous safeguards for the poor and vulnerable, but the people frequently exploited the weakest of their citizens. In short, Israel failed to be the light to the nations that God was calling them to be.

But God was determined to keep working with this imperfect nation to achieve his goal. So God sent special messengers—the prophets—to call the people back to him. The messages of many of these prophets have been collected and preserved for us, and they now comprise nearly a third of the Bible's First Testament.

The prophets play the role of covenant mediators, calling the people to be loyal to their covenant with the LORD. Many of the prophets frame their arguments as “covenant lawsuits” against the people. The prophet Micah, for example, announces at one point, “Listen to the LORD's complaint! He has a case against his people.” The prophets establish in their arguments that the people have become unfaithful to God by failing to keep their covenant commitments.

This is why the prophets typically begin their messages with warnings, followed by the announcement of necessary consequences for disobedience. But judgment is never the LORD's final word for Israel. Difficult messages of correction and judgment transform into visions of restoration and flourishing life. The prophets see a new future for

Israel—and the world—based solely on God's good promises and his covenant faithfulness.

The prophets themselves were more street preachers than the authors of books, normally proclaiming the LORD's messages at the gates of Jerusalem and the Temple. They usually spoke in oracles, which were recorded and serve as the basic literary unit for most of the prophetic books. Prophetic oracles are poems that convey a single idea through several strategies.

The prophets often use visual metaphors from the natural world to help their listeners imagine or picture their messages. Sometimes the metaphors came directly from the prophets' dramatic visions from God, which cannot easily be described in human terms. At other times, the metaphors were drawn from the prophets' own circumstances or experiences.

Some oracles are based on the repetition of key ideas—“litanies” (or lists) that drive home an essential point. Amos, for example, describes five different misfortunes that God has brought upon his people and says after each one, “But still you would not return to me.” Prophetic language is typically strong and evokes powerful emotions because so much was at stake in these interventions with Israel.

Some of the prophets set their oracles to music. This was another way they could ensure that their message would spread and be remembered. Isaiah, for example, introduces one oracle with, “I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard.” This particular oracle presents an extended metaphor, describing Israel as a well-tended vineyard that failed to produce the fruit the Keeper wanted: the justice and righteousness that God had been cultivating in them.

We present these books of the prophets in an order that follows their general historical sequence. As Israel journeys from the time of the empire of Assyria, through the period of the rule of Babylon and then Persia, to the return of the people to their homeland, the prophets are present to speak into Israel's various historical situations. The collections cannot all be dated precisely. Jonah and Joel are particularly difficult to locate historically, so they are placed last and can be read in view of the larger prophetic tradition.

As Israel's wayfaring continues through the centuries, the prophets relentlessly remind the people of their true calling. Even through the dark abyss of exile and the loss of land and home, their hope for the future remains. This story is God's, and at the end of the day he will act to save his people—and his world.

TALKING TOGETHER:

God was determined to stay in covenant relationship with the people he had chosen—Israel. His plans to save the entire world depended on them. The ups and downs of this relationship went on for centuries, but God remained faithful. Communication was a key part of this relationship (like it is for all relationships), and that’s why God gave his messages for his people to his servants the prophets. As you read the prophets, remember that you are listening in on someone else’s conversation. God is speaking his truth to his ancient people. How could this affect how you read and learn from these passages?

DAY 2**Hurting the People God Loves**

(from *Prophets*, pages 7-8, 10-11)

After the reign of King Solomon, the people of God split into two nations—Israel in the north and Judah in the south. It was eight hundred years before the birth of Jesus, and the northern kingdom of Israel was strong and prosperous. The economy was flourishing, and their military was robust. But all was not well. God sent a shepherd from a small town in the southern kingdom—Judah—to bring his message to Israel. The LORD was angry that these self-satisfied, wealthy people had forgotten to take care of the poor. Their worship did not make God happy because they were not following God’s instructions for living well and caring for others.



“Now listen to this, and announce it throughout all Israel,” says the Lord, the LORD God of Heaven’s Armies.

“On the very day I punish Israel for its sins,
I will destroy the pagan altars at Bethel.
The horns of the altar will be cut off
and fall to the ground.
And I will destroy the beautiful homes of the wealthy—
their winter mansions and their summer houses,
too—

all their palaces filled with ivory,”
says the LORD.

Listen to me, you fat cows
living in Samaria,
you women who oppress the poor
and crush the needy,
and who are always calling to your husbands,
“Bring us another drink!”
The Sovereign LORD has sworn this by his holiness:
“The time will come when you will be led away
with hooks in your noses.
Every last one of you will be dragged away
like a fish on a hook!
You will be led out through the ruins of the wall;
you will be thrown from your fortresses,”
says the LORD. . . .

You trample the poor,
stealing their grain through taxes and unfair rent.
Therefore, though you build beautiful stone
houses,
you will never live in them.
Though you plant lush vineyards,
you will never drink wine from them.
For I know the vast number of your sins
and the depth of your rebellions.

You oppress good people by taking bribes
and deprive the poor of justice in the courts.
So those who are smart keep their mouths shut,
for it is an evil time.

Do what is good and run from evil
so that you may live!
Then the LORD God of Heaven’s Armies will be your
helper,
just as you have claimed.
Hate evil and love what is good;
turn your courts into true halls of justice.
Perhaps even yet the LORD God of Heaven’s Armies
will have mercy on the remnant of his people.

Therefore, this is what the Lord, the LORD God of Heaven's Armies, says:

“There will be crying in all the public squares
and mourning in every street.
Call for the farmers to weep with you,
and summon professional mourners to wail.
There will be wailing in every vineyard,
for I will destroy them all,”
says the LORD. . . .

“I hate all your show and pretense—
the hypocrisy of your religious festivals and solemn assemblies.
I will not accept your burnt offerings and grain offerings.
I won't even notice all your choice peace offerings.
Away with your noisy hymns of praise!
I will not listen to the music of your harps.
Instead, I want to see a mighty flood of justice,
an endless river of righteous living.”

—*from the prophet Amos*

TALKING TOGETHER:

Do you think the message of Amos is relevant to our own society today? What would Amos say if he saw how the people of God take care of all those who struggle to live today? Are we following God's instructions? Is he pleased with our “noisy hymns of praise”?

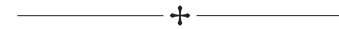
DAY 3

Renewing the Marriage of God and His People

(from *Prophets*, pages 23-24)

Soon after the time of Amos, the prophet Hosea also brought his messages to the northern kingdom of Israel. Hosea compared the covenant relationship between God and his people to a marriage. When Israel worshiped other gods, they were like an unfaithful wife who broke God's heart. The question then becomes: What will God do with a

wife who doesn't love him or follow him? Will the covenant be broken forever?



“No one will be able
to rescue her from my hands.
I will put an end to her annual festivals,
her new moon celebrations, and her Sabbath days—
all her appointed festivals.
I will destroy her grapevines and fig trees,
things she claims her lovers gave her.
I will let them grow into tangled thickets,
where only wild animals will eat the fruit.
I will punish her for all those times
when she burned incense to her images of Baal,
when she put on her earrings and jewels
and went out to look for her lovers
but forgot all about me,”
says the LORD.

“But then I will win her back once again.
I will lead her into the desert
and speak tenderly to her there.
I will return her vineyards to her
and transform the Valley of Trouble into a gateway of hope.
She will give herself to me there,
as she did long ago when she was young,
when I freed her from her captivity in Egypt.
When that day comes,” says the LORD,
“you will call me ‘my husband’
instead of ‘my master.’
O Israel, I will wipe the many names of Baal from your lips,
and you will never mention them again.
On that day I will make a covenant
with all the wild animals and the birds of the sky
and the animals that scurry along the ground
so they will not harm you.
I will remove all weapons of war from the land,
all swords and bows,
so you can live unafraid
in peace and safety.

I will make you my wife forever,
 showing you righteousness and justice,
 unfailing love and compassion.
 I will be faithful to you and make you mine,
 and you will finally know me as the LORD.

“In that day, I will answer,”
 says the LORD.

“I will answer the sky as it pleads for clouds.
 And the sky will answer the earth with rain.
 Then the earth will answer the thirsty cries
 of the grain, the grapevines, and the olive trees.
 And they in turn will answer,
 ‘Jezreel’ — ‘God plants!’
 At that time I will plant a crop of Israelites
 and raise them for myself.
 I will show love
 to those I called ‘Not loved.’
 And to those I called ‘Not my people,’
 I will say, ‘Now you are my people.’
 And they will reply, ‘You are our God!’”

—*from the prophet Hosea*

TALKING TOGETHER:

The story of the prophets is the story of present failure but long-term success. Israel struggles again and again to live up to their end of the covenant agreement with God. Therefore, God promises to judge and correct them. He needs people in the world who show the world what it means to know God and to live life as he meant it to be lived. Israel seems unable to embrace this vocation. But then God makes bigger, longer-term promises. Despite Israel’s failures, God himself will renew the covenant and restore the lives of the people. He will love them and bless them once again. How are we like ancient Israel? Can God count on us? What promises does God make to us today?

DAY 4

How a Father Loves His Son

(from *Prophets*, pages 35-36, 39)

As Hosea continues his messages we see more and more that God has a heart filled with love for his people. Now Hosea compares the covenant relationship to how a parent loves his or her child. God is Israel’s Father, and Israel is God’s firstborn son. So when Israel strays and turns away from God, he pleads with them to return to him. People are unfaithful, but God is faithful. Because his heart is strong for his people, he will call them back.



“When Israel was a child, I loved him,
 and I called my son out of Egypt.
 But the more I called to him,
 the farther he moved from me,
 offering sacrifices to the images of Baal
 and burning incense to idols.
 I myself taught Israel how to walk,
 leading him along by the hand.
 But he doesn’t know or even care
 that it was I who took care of him.
 I led Israel along
 with my ropes of kindness and love.
 I lifted the yoke from his neck,
 and I myself stooped to feed him.

“But since my people refuse to return to me,
 they will return to Egypt
 and will be forced to serve Assyria.
 War will swirl through their cities;
 their enemies will crash through their gates.
 They will destroy them,
 trapping them in their own evil plans.
 For my people are determined to desert me.
 They call me the Most High,
 but they don’t truly honor me.

“Oh, how can I give you up, Israel?
 How can I let you go?
 How can I destroy you like Admah
 or demolish you like Zeboiim?
 My heart is torn within me,
 and my compassion overflows.
 No, I will not unleash my fierce anger.
 I will not completely destroy Israel,
 for I am God and not a mere mortal.
 I am the Holy One living among you,
 and I will not come to destroy.
 For someday the people will follow me.
 I, the LORD, will roar like a lion.
 And when I roar,
 my people will return trembling from the west.
 Like a flock of birds, they will come from Egypt.
 Trembling like doves, they will return from Assyria.
 And I will bring them home again,”
 says the LORD. . . .

Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God,
 for your sins have brought you down.
 Bring your confessions, and return to the LORD.
 Say to him,
 “Forgive all our sins and graciously receive us,
 so that we may offer you our praises.
 Assyria cannot save us,
 nor can our warhorses.
 Never again will we say to the idols we have made,
 ‘You are our gods.’
 No, in you alone
 do the orphans find mercy.”

The LORD says,
 “Then I will heal you of your faithlessness;
 my love will know no bounds,
 for my anger will be gone forever.
 I will be to Israel
 like a refreshing dew from heaven.
 Israel will blossom like the lily;
 it will send roots deep into the soil
 like the cedars in Lebanon.

Its branches will spread out like beautiful olive trees,
 as fragrant as the cedars of Lebanon.
 My people will again live under my shade.
 They will flourish like grain and blossom like grapevines.
 They will be as fragrant as the wines of Lebanon.

“O Israel, stay away from idols!
 I am the one who answers your prayers and cares for you.
 I am like a tree that is always green;
 all your fruit comes from me.”

+ + +

Let those who are wise understand these things.
 Let those with discernment listen carefully.
 The paths of the LORD are true and right,
 and righteous people live by walking in them.
 But in those paths sinners stumble and fall.

—*from the prophet Hosea*

TALKING TOGETHER:

Hosea tells us that God’s love will overcome even the hard hearts of his people. He will plant them in their own land again, and they will flourish. This kind of love never gives up. What does it mean to you to know that God has this kind of love for us? What do you think this kind of love leads to? Can love change things?

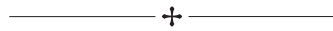
DAY 5

Now and Then

(from *Prophets*, pages 45, 48)

The prophet Micah does for the southern kingdom of Judah what Hosea had done for the northern kingdom of Israel: He brings them the clear word of the LORD about the consequences of their actions. Like Israel, Judah is a place of injustice and evil. God is looking for a partner in the world who will work with him, bringing his light and life

to others. When Judah eventually failed, consequences would have to come. But once again, judgment is not the last word.



What sorrow awaits you who lie awake at night,
thinking up evil plans.

You rise at dawn and hurry to carry them out,
simply because you have the power to do so.

When you want a piece of land,
you find a way to seize it.

When you want someone's house,
you take it by fraud and violence.

You cheat a man of his property,
stealing his family's inheritance.

But this is what the LORD says:

"I will reward your evil with evil;
you won't be able to pull your neck out of the
noose.

You will no longer walk around proudly,
for it will be a terrible time."

In that day your enemies will make fun of you
by singing this song of despair about you:

"We are finished,
completely ruined!
God has confiscated our land,
taking it from us.
He has given our fields
to those who betrayed us."

Others will set your boundaries then,
and the LORD's people will have no say
in how the land is divided.

"Don't say such things,"
the people respond.

"Don't prophesy like that.
Such disasters will never come our way!"

Should you talk that way, O family of Israel?
Will the LORD's Spirit have patience with such
behavior? . . .

+

In the last days, the mountain of the LORD's house
will be the highest of all—
the most important place on earth.

It will be raised above the other hills,
and people from all over the world will stream there to worship.

People from many nations will come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of Jacob's God.

There he will teach us his ways,
and we will walk in his paths."

For the LORD's teaching will go out from Zion;
his word will go out from Jerusalem.

The LORD will mediate between peoples
and will settle disputes between strong nations far away.

They will hammer their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nation will no longer fight against nation,
nor train for war anymore.

Everyone will live in peace and prosperity,
enjoying their own grapevines and fig trees,
for there will be nothing to fear.

The LORD of Heaven's Armies
has made this promise!

Though the nations around us follow their idols,
we will follow the LORD our God forever and ever.

"In that coming day," says the LORD,

"I will gather together those who are lame,
those who have been exiles,
and those whom I have filled with grief.

Those who are weak will survive as a remnant;
those who were exiles will become a strong nation.

Then I, the LORD, will rule from Jerusalem
as their king forever."

—*from the prophet Micah*

TALKING TOGETHER:

Micah gives us a glimpse of God's big story: God chose Israel in order to ultimately welcome all nations back to him. This is a powerful vision

of people from all over the world coming to God's Temple to worship God and to learn his ways. We learn later in the Bible that we now live in the time when this vision is coming true. We are now the temple where God lives, and our calling is to welcome all people back into relationship with him. You are part of God's mission to bring life back to God's world—peace and prosperity for his entire creation. What are some ways you and your family can put this vision into practice?

DAY 6

A Passion for Justice

(from *Prophets*, pages 57-59)

The prophet Isaiah lived during the same time as Micah. But Isaiah's collection of prophecies is twelve times bigger than Micah's. This is one of the key books of the Bible for understanding how God's covenants move forward through history until the time of the new covenant in Jesus. New Testament writers quote from Isaiah more than any other book except Psalms.

Isaiah describes how God used the kingdoms of both Assyria and Babylon to judge his people Israel and how there would be a glorious time of restoration after the people had suffered deportation and exile. The current story in Israel is about injustice, oppression, and the worship of idols and false gods. But God is working to bring a new future and a different story through a descendant of King David—a future that will include the renewal of the entire cosmos.



These are the visions that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. He saw these visions during the years when Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah were kings of Judah.

+ + +

Listen, O heavens! Pay attention, earth!

This is what the LORD says:

“The children I raised and cared for
have rebelled against me.

Even an ox knows its owner,
and a donkey recognizes its master's care—
but Israel doesn't know its master.
My people don't recognize my care for them.”

Oh, what a sinful nation they are—
loaded down with a burden of guilt.
They are evil people,
corrupt children who have rejected the LORD.
They have despised the Holy One of Israel
and turned their backs on him. . . .

“What makes you think I want all your sacrifices?”
says the LORD.

“I am sick of your burnt offerings of rams
and the fat of fattened cattle.

I get no pleasure from the blood
of bulls and lambs and goats.

When you come to worship me,
who asked you to parade through my courts with all your ceremony?
Stop bringing me your meaningless gifts;
the incense of your offerings disgusts me!

As for your celebrations of the new moon and the Sabbath
and your special days for fasting—
they are all sinful and false.

I want no more of your pious meetings.
I hate your new moon celebrations and your annual festivals.

They are a burden to me. I cannot stand them!
When you lift up your hands in prayer, I will not look.

Though you offer many prayers, I will not listen,
for your hands are covered with the blood of innocent victims.

Wash yourselves and be clean!
Get your sins out of my sight.

Give up your evil ways.
Learn to do good.

Seek justice.

Help the oppressed.

Defend the cause of orphans.

Fight for the rights of widows.

“Come now, let's settle this,”
says the LORD.

“Though your sins are like scarlet,
 I will make them as white as snow.
 Though they are red like crimson,
 I will make them as white as wool.
 If you will only obey me,
 you will have plenty to eat.
 But if you turn away and refuse to listen,
 you will be devoured by the sword of your enemies.
 I, the LORD, have spoken!”

—*from the prophet Isaiah*

TALKING TOGETHER:

God is quite clear in his messages to his people through Isaiah. He wants them to follow his teaching: seek justice; help those who are oppressed; and defend orphans, widows, and those without power. Until this happens, he isn't interested in their prayers or their worship. How can we come to God and settle things with him? What practical things can we do to please him with our prayers and worship?

DAY 7

Called to a Mission

(from *Prophets*, pages 67-68, 71-72)

Isaiah was called to a hard mission—telling God's people why and how God was going to correct them. Isaiah says it will seem to them that their story with God is coming to an end, with their towns empty and their houses deserted. Nevertheless, God will not let his story close with loss and despair. Isaiah was called to also speak of a new light, a new son, a child who would be born. All the boots and war uniforms will be burned, and one called the Prince of Peace will come and rule the land.



It was in the year King Uzziah died that I saw the Lord. He was sitting on a lofty throne, and the train of his robe filled the Temple. Attending him were mighty seraphim, each having six wings. With two wings they

covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. They were calling out to each other,

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Heaven's Armies!
 The whole earth is filled with his glory!”

Their voices shook the Temple to its foundations, and the entire building was filled with smoke.

Then I said, “It's all over! I am doomed, for I am a sinful man. I have filthy lips, and I live among a people with filthy lips. Yet I have seen the King, the LORD of Heaven's Armies.”

Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal he had taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. He touched my lips with it and said, “See, this coal has touched your lips. Now your guilt is removed, and your sins are forgiven.”

Then I heard the Lord asking, “Whom should I send as a messenger to this people? Who will go for us?”

I said, “Here I am. Send me.”

And he said, “Yes, go, and say to this people,

‘Listen carefully, but do not understand.

Watch closely, but learn nothing.’

Harden the hearts of these people.

Plug their ears and shut their eyes.

That way, they will not see with their eyes,

nor hear with their ears,

nor understand with their hearts

and turn to me for healing.”

Then I said, “Lord, how long will this go on?”

And he replied,

“Until their towns are empty,

their houses are deserted,

and the whole country is a wasteland;

until the LORD has sent everyone away,

and the entire land of Israel lies deserted.

If even a tenth—a remnant—survive,

it will be invaded again and burned.

But as a terebinth or oak tree leaves a stump when it is cut down,

so Israel's stump will be a holy seed.” . . .

Nevertheless, that time of darkness and despair will not go on forever. The land of Zebulun and Naphtali will be humbled, but there will be a time in

the future when Galilee of the Gentiles, which lies along the road that runs between the Jordan and the sea, will be filled with glory.

The people who walk in darkness
will see a great light.
For those who live in a land of deep darkness,
a light will shine.
You will enlarge the nation of Israel,
and its people will rejoice.
They will rejoice before you
as people rejoice at the harvest
and like warriors dividing the plunder.
For you will break the yoke of their slavery
and lift the heavy burden from their shoulders.
You will break the oppressor's rod,
just as you did when you destroyed the army of Midian.
The boots of the warrior
and the uniforms bloodstained by war
will all be burned.
They will be fuel for the fire.
For a child is born to us,
a son is given to us.
The government will rest on his shoulders.
And he will be called:
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
His government and its peace
will never end.
He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne of his
ancestor David
for all eternity.
The passionate commitment of the LORD of Heaven's Armies
will make this happen!

—from the prophet Isaiah

TALKING TOGETHER:

Have you ever felt God calling you to a mission? Do you have a clear sense of what God wants you to do in his world? Sometimes this sense of calling can come to us early and clearly. Sometimes it comes later, and perhaps it's not quite so clear. But all of us are called to some special job

in God's Kingdom. And although we may not consider ourselves worthy, God himself calls us, prepares us, and uses us all in our own ways.

DAY 8

Against the Empires of the World

(from *Prophets*, pages 78-80)

In addition to speaking words specifically for his people Israel, God also gave his servants the prophets messages about the other nations of the world. God is the Creator of all things, and he rules over all the nations, not just Israel. This means that ultimately God will also have to deal with those nations, for his Kingdom is meant to be for all the earth, not just for a few people. So here we read the message God gave to Isaiah about the ancient empire of Babylon. For a long time Babylon ruled the ancient Near East, and God used Babylon to judge his own people Israel. But Babylon also needed to be judged.



Isaiah son of Amoz received this message concerning the destruction of Babylon:

“Raise a signal flag on a bare hilltop.
Call up an army against Babylon.
Wave your hand to encourage them
as they march into the palaces of the high and mighty.
I, the LORD, have dedicated these soldiers for this task.
Yes, I have called mighty warriors to express my anger,
and they will rejoice when I am exalted.”

Hear the noise on the mountains!
Listen, as the vast armies march!
It is the noise and shouting of many nations.
The LORD of Heaven's Armies has called this army together.
They come from distant countries,
from beyond the farthest horizons.
They are the LORD's weapons to carry out his anger.
With them he will destroy the whole land.

Scream in terror, for the day of the LORD has arrived—
 the time for the Almighty to destroy.
 Every arm is paralyzed with fear.
 Every heart melts,
 and people are terrified.
 Pangs of anguish grip them,
 like those of a woman in labor.
 They look helplessly at one another,
 their faces aflame with fear.

For see, the day of the LORD is coming—
 the terrible day of his fury and fierce anger.
 The land will be made desolate,
 and all the sinners destroyed with it.
 The heavens will be black above them;
 the stars will give no light.
 The sun will be dark when it rises,
 and the moon will provide no light.

“I, the LORD, will punish the world for its evil
 and the wicked for their sin.

I will crush the arrogance of the proud
 and humble the pride of the mighty.
 I will make people scarcer than gold—
 more rare than the fine gold of Ophir.
 For I will shake the heavens.

The earth will move from its place
 when the LORD of Heaven’s Armies displays his wrath
 in the day of his fierce anger.” . . .

But the LORD will have mercy on the descendants of Jacob. He will choose Israel as his special people once again. He will bring them back to settle once again in their own land. And people from many different nations will come and join them there and unite with the people of Israel. The nations of the world will help the people of Israel to return, and those who come to live in the LORD’s land will serve them. Those who captured Israel will themselves be captured, and Israel will rule over its enemies.

In that wonderful day when the LORD gives his people rest from sorrow and fear, from slavery and chains, you will taunt the king of Babylon. You will say,

“The mighty man has been destroyed.
 Yes, your insolence is ended.

For the LORD has crushed your wicked power
 and broken your evil rule.
 You struck the people with endless blows of rage
 and held the nations in your angry grip
 with unrelenting tyranny.
 But finally the earth is at rest and quiet.
 Now it can sing again!
 Even the trees of the forest—
 the cypress trees and the cedars of Lebanon—
 sing out this joyous song:
 ‘Since you have been cut down,
 no one will come now to cut us down!’”

—*from the prophet Isaiah*

TALKING TOGETHER:

Great empires have continued to rule the world down to our own day. These empires tend to make a god of their own power and glory. They become focused on themselves, often at the expense of the well-being of the other peoples of the earth. They are filled with pride and ignore the truth about God and his rule. They typically oppress God’s people who worship only him.

In the Bible, the name “Babylon” came to be a symbol for these empires. In the New Testament we see this name used for the Roman Empire that ruled in the time of Jesus. Pray today that the day of the LORD—the time when God’s rule will be complete and the empires of the world will fall—will come soon. Pray for God’s peace and justice to come in its fullness.

DAY 9

Chaos vs. Creation

(from *Prophets*, pages 95-97, 99)

In the Bible’s great story, the fate of the earth is closely tied to the fate of humans. The earth is the home God made for us, and then he gave us a unique role to play in watching over and caring for it. We are God’s image-bearers, the ones he has placed in authority over his world. So

when we go wrong, we take the world down with us. Our wrongdoing has consequences for the rest of God's creation. God meant for there to be thriving life and great joy in his world, but we have interfered with his intentions. So now he must work to bring salvation back, and this is a work that only he can do.



The earth mourns and dries up,
and the land wastes away and withers.
Even the greatest people on earth waste away.
The earth suffers for the sins of its people,
for they have twisted God's instructions,
violated his laws,
and broken his everlasting covenant.
Therefore, a curse consumes the earth.
Its people must pay the price for their sin.
They are destroyed by fire,
and only a few are left alive.
The grapevines waste away,
and there is no new wine.
All the merry-makers sigh and mourn.
The cheerful sound of tambourines is stilled;
the happy cries of celebration are heard no more.
The melodious chords of the harp are silent.
Gone are the joys of wine and song;
alcoholic drink turns bitter in the mouth.
The city writhes in chaos;
every home is locked to keep out intruders.
Mobs gather in the streets, crying out for wine.
Joy has turned to gloom.
Gladness has been banished from the land.
The city is left in ruins,
its gates battered down.
Throughout the earth the story is the same—
only a remnant is left,
like the stray olives left on the tree
or the few grapes left on the vine after harvest. . . .



O LORD, I will honor and praise your name,
for you are my God.

You do such wonderful things!
You planned them long ago,
and now you have accomplished them.
You turn mighty cities into heaps of ruins.
Cities with strong walls are turned to rubble.
Beautiful palaces in distant lands disappear
and will never be rebuilt.
Therefore, strong nations will declare your glory;
ruthless nations will fear you.

But you are a tower of refuge to the poor, O LORD,
a tower of refuge to the needy in distress.
You are a refuge from the storm
and a shelter from the heat.
For the oppressive acts of ruthless people
are like a storm beating against a wall,
or like the relentless heat of the desert.
But you silence the roar of foreign nations.
As the shade of a cloud cools relentless heat,
so the boastful songs of ruthless people are
stilled.

In Jerusalem, the LORD of Heaven's Armies
will spread a wonderful feast
for all the people of the world.
It will be a delicious banquet
with clear, well-aged wine and choice meat.
There he will remove the cloud of gloom,
the shadow of death that hangs over the earth.
He will swallow up death forever!
The Sovereign LORD will wipe away all tears.
He will remove forever all insults and mockery
against his land and people.
The LORD has spoken! . . .

LORD, you will grant us peace;
all we have accomplished is really from you.
O LORD our God, others have ruled us,
but you alone are the one we worship.
Those we served before are dead and gone.
Their departed spirits will never return!
You attacked them and destroyed them,
and they are long forgotten.

O LORD, you have made our nation great;
 yes, you have made us great.
 You have extended our borders,
 and we give you the glory!

LORD, in distress we searched for you.
 We prayed beneath the burden of your discipline.
 Just as a pregnant woman
 writhes and cries out in pain as she gives birth,
 so were we in your presence, LORD.
 We, too, writhe in agony,
 but nothing comes of our suffering.
 We have not given salvation to the earth,
 nor brought life into the world.
 But those who die in the LORD will live;
 their bodies will rise again!
 Those who sleep in the earth
 will rise up and sing for joy!
 For your life-giving light will fall like dew
 on your people in the place of the dead!

—*from the prophet Isaiah*

TALKING TOGETHER:

The great enemies of God’s good creation—sin and death—have been ruling for a long time. But the vision of Isaiah tells us that God will finally defeat these enemies once and for all. He will swallow up death forever, and his people will rise again, restored to life in their physical bodies within God’s creation. How is this hope different from simply going to heaven when we die? Does this change how we think about our future? The world’s future?

DAY 10

This Is the Way You Should Go

(from *Prophets*, pages 105-108)

The world is God’s, for he made it. God’s vision for the world is that it would be filled with life, joy, health, and most of all, love. When the

world went wrong, God began working to bring his first intention back into the world. This is why he chose Abraham and his descendants—to be the means by which healing would come to all peoples. Here, Isaiah gives us a picture of what that healing would look like, both for Israel and for the world.



Soon—and it will not be very long—
 the forests of Lebanon will become a fertile field,
 and the fertile field will yield bountiful crops.
 In that day the deaf will hear words read from a book,
 and the blind will see through the gloom and darkness.
 The humble will be filled with fresh joy from the LORD.
 The poor will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.
 The scoffer will be gone,
 the arrogant will disappear,
 and those who plot evil will be killed.
 Those who convict the innocent
 by their false testimony will disappear.
 A similar fate awaits those who use trickery to pervert justice
 and who tell lies to destroy the innocent.

That is why the LORD, who redeemed Abraham, says to the people of Israel,

“My people will no longer be ashamed
 or turn pale with fear.
 For when they see their many children
 and all the blessings I have given them,
 they will recognize the holiness of the Holy One of Jacob.
 They will stand in awe of the God of Israel.
 Then the wayward will gain understanding,
 and complainers will accept instruction. . . .

“Because you despise what I tell you
 and trust instead in oppression and lies,
 calamity will come upon you suddenly—
 like a bulging wall that bursts and falls.
 In an instant it will collapse
 and come crashing down.
 You will be smashed like a piece of pottery—
 shattered so completely that
 there won’t be a piece big enough

to carry coals from a fireplace
or a little water from the well.”

This is what the Sovereign LORD,
the Holy One of Israel, says:

“Only in returning to me
and resting in me will you be saved.

In quietness and confidence is your strength.
But you would have none of it.

You said, ‘No, we will get our help from Egypt.

They will give us swift horses for riding into battle.’

But the only swiftmess you are going to see
is the swiftmess of your enemies chasing you!

One of them will chase a thousand of you.

Five of them will make all of you flee.

You will be left like a lonely flagpole on a hill
or a tattered banner on a distant mountaintop.”

So the LORD must wait for you to come to him
so he can show you his love and compassion.

For the LORD is a faithful God.

Blessed are those who wait for his help.

O people of Zion, who live in Jerusalem,
you will weep no more.

He will be gracious if you ask for help.

He will surely respond to the sound of your cries.

Though the Lord gave you adversity for food
and suffering for drink,

he will still be with you to teach you.

You will see your teacher with your own eyes.

Your own ears will hear him.

Right behind you a voice will say,

“This is the way you should go,”
whether to the right or to the left.

Then you will destroy all your silver idols
and your precious gold images.

You will throw them out like filthy rags,
saying to them, “Good riddance!”

—from the prophet Isaiah

TALKING TOGETHER:

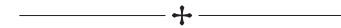
Today, God wants us to work with him to bring health and restoration back into the world. But to do this we must turn to him, know him, and follow him. We won’t find what we need anywhere else. What can you do for God’s mission today? How can you grow closer to God? How can you bring his love and peace to the people and places that you know?

DAY 11

Hope for the Future

(from *Prophets*, pages 115-116)

Danger. Drought. Disease. There are many things that threaten to do us harm in the world. And in the ancient world people had even less protection from harmful things than we do today. But God gave Isaiah a message of hope for the people: God is going to return to them, and when he does, he will bring safety, life-giving water, and full health and restoration. In other words, he will bring everything needed for their lives to thrive.



Even the wilderness and desert will be glad in those days.

The wasteland will rejoice and blossom with spring crocuses.

Yes, there will be an abundance of flowers

and singing and joy!

The deserts will become as green as the mountains of Lebanon,

as lovely as Mount Carmel or the plain of Sharon.

There the LORD will display his glory,

the splendor of our God.

With this news, strengthen those who have tired hands,

and encourage those who have weak knees.

Say to those with fearful hearts,

“Be strong, and do not fear,

for your God is coming to destroy your enemies.

He is coming to save you.”

And when he comes, he will open the eyes of the blind

and unplug the ears of the deaf.

The lame will leap like a deer,
 and those who cannot speak will sing for joy!
 Springs will gush forth in the wilderness,
 and streams will water the wasteland.
 The parched ground will become a pool,
 and springs of water will satisfy the thirsty land.
 Marsh grass and reeds and rushes will flourish
 where desert jackals once lived.

And a great road will go through that once deserted land.
 It will be named the Highway of Holiness.
 Evil-minded people will never travel on it.
 It will be only for those who walk in God's ways;
 fools will never walk there.
 Lions will not lurk along its course,
 nor any other ferocious beasts.
 There will be no other dangers.
 Only the redeemed will walk on it.
 Those who have been ransomed by the LORD will return.
 They will enter Jerusalem singing,
 crowned with everlasting joy.
 Sorrow and mourning will disappear,
 and they will be filled with joy and gladness.

—*from the prophet Isaiah*

TALKING TOGETHER:

The people Isaiah prophesied to received his words here as a promise for the future. They knew this promise wasn't going to be fulfilled in their own day. But because they knew that God was working to bring his salvation into the world, they could patiently wait for it. God would do things in his own time. The point was that God would save Israel, and through Israel, God would save the world. But all of it would happen when the time was right. Do you have difficulty waiting for something you really want? Is it hard to be patient for God to come and make all things right?

DAY 12

From Exile to Life

(from *Prophets*, pages 123-126)

In the year 598 BC, the empire of Babylon defeated the nation of Judah and carried most of the people into exile. The prophets of the LORD had been warning the people about this for a long time, urging them to repent and turn back to God. But when the people showed they were not fully devoted to worshiping God alone and following his ways, God sent Babylon to judge them. The destruction of Jerusalem (Judah's capital city) and especially the loss of the Temple caused God's people to question whether their story with God was over. What could God do now? What would happen to them? It's here that the book of Isaiah takes a major turn, focusing especially on the return from exile and the great new hope that God's people now have.



“Comfort, comfort my people,”

says your God.

“Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.

Tell her that her sad days are gone

and her sins are pardoned.

Yes, the LORD has punished her twice over

for all her sins.”

Listen! It's the voice of someone shouting,

“Clear the way through the wilderness

for the LORD!

Make a straight highway through the wasteland

for our God!

Fill in the valleys,

and level the mountains and hills.

Straighten the curves,

and smooth out the rough places.

Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed,

and all people will see it together.

The LORD has spoken!”

A voice said, “Shout!”
 I asked, “What should I shout?”
 “Shout that people are like the grass.
 Their beauty fades as quickly
 as the flowers in a field.
 The grass withers and the flowers fade
 beneath the breath of the LORD.
 And so it is with people.
 The grass withers and the flowers fade,
 but the word of our God stands forever.”

O Zion, messenger of good news,
 shout from the mountaintops!
 Shout it louder, O Jerusalem.
 Shout, and do not be afraid.
 Tell the towns of Judah,
 “Your God is coming!”
 Yes, the Sovereign LORD is coming in power.
 He will rule with a powerful arm.
 See, he brings his reward with him as he comes.
 He will feed his flock like a shepherd.
 He will carry the lambs in his arms,
 holding them close to his heart.
 He will gently lead the mother sheep with their young. . . .

“To whom will you compare me?
 Who is my equal?” asks the Holy One.

Look up into the heavens.
 Who created all the stars?
 He brings them out like an army, one after another,
 calling each by its name.
 Because of his great power and incomparable strength,
 not a single one is missing.
 O Jacob, how can you say the LORD does not see your troubles?
 O Israel, how can you say God ignores your rights?
 Have you never heard?
 Have you never understood?
 The LORD is the everlasting God,
 the Creator of all the earth.
 He never grows weak or weary.
 No one can measure the depths of his
 understanding.

He gives power to the weak
 and strength to the powerless.
 Even youths will become weak and tired,
 and young men will fall in exhaustion.
 But those who trust in the LORD will find new
 strength.
 They will soar high on wings like eagles.
 They will run and not grow weary.
 They will walk and not faint.

—*from the prophet Isaiah*

TALKING TOGETHER:

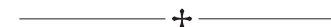
The word of God—that is, the promise of God to end his people’s exile—will surely stand. God will do what he said he would do. He will bring his people back to their homeland. He sees the suffering of his people, and in his love he will bring it to an end. God’s people can count on God to do all he promises because he is the Creator and he is everlasting. A big part of being faithful to God is trusting that God really is who he says he is. What promises are we still waiting for God to keep? How can we rely on God even when our own strength fails?

DAY 13

There Is One God, and There Is One Mission

(from *Prophets*, pages 138-139, 143-144)

The promise of God to bring his salvation depends on two crucial things: (1) that there is no god but the LORD, and (2) that he has chosen Israel as his servant to be a light to the other nations of the world. These two points are foundational to the entire story of the Bible.



For the LORD is God,
 and he created the heavens and earth
 and put everything in place.

He made the world to be lived in,
 not to be a place of empty chaos.
 “I am the LORD,” he says,
 “and there is no other.
 I publicly proclaim bold promises.
 I do not whisper obscurities in some dark corner.
 I would not have told the people of Israel to seek me
 if I could not be found.
 I, the LORD, speak only what is true
 and declare only what is right.
 “Gather together and come,
 you fugitives from surrounding nations.
 What fools they are who carry around their wooden idols
 and pray to gods that cannot save!
 Consult together, argue your case.
 Get together and decide what to say.
 Who made these things known so long ago?
 What idol ever told you they would happen?
 Was it not I, the LORD?
 For there is no other God but me,
 a righteous God and Savior.
 There is none but me.
 Let all the world look to me for salvation!
 For I am God; there is no other.
 I have sworn by my own name;
 I have spoken the truth,
 and I will never go back on my word:
 Every knee will bend to me,
 and every tongue will declare allegiance to me.”
 The people will declare,
 “The LORD is the source of all my righteousness and strength.”
 And all who were angry with him
 will come to him and be ashamed.
 In the LORD all the generations of Israel will be justified,
 and in him they will boast. . . .

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Listen to me, all you in distant lands!
 Pay attention, you who are far away!
 The LORD called me before my birth;
 from within the womb he called me by name.

He made my words of judgment as sharp as a sword.
 He has hidden me in the shadow of his hand.
 I am like a sharp arrow in his quiver.
 He said to me, “You are my servant, Israel,
 and you will bring me glory.”
 I replied, “But my work seems so useless!
 I have spent my strength for nothing and to no purpose.
 Yet I leave it all in the LORD’s hand;
 I will trust God for my reward.”
 And now the LORD speaks—
 the one who formed me in my mother’s womb to be his servant,
 who commissioned me to bring Israel back to him.
 The LORD has honored me,
 and my God has given me strength.
 He says, “You will do more than restore the people of Israel to me.
 I will make you a light to the Gentiles,
 and you will bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”
 The LORD, the Redeemer
 and Holy One of Israel,
 says to the one who is despised and rejected by the nations,
 to the one who is the servant of rulers:
 “Kings will stand at attention when you pass by.
 Princes will also bow low
 because of the LORD, the faithful one,
 the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”

—*from the prophet Isaiah*

TALKING TOGETHER:

There are many forces or powers in the world that we are tempted to put our trust in or focus on instead of God. This can include money or the things that money can buy, being in charge, the strength of our country, our own pleasure, or anything that becomes the center of our life rather than God himself. But the prophecies of Isaiah teach us that there is only one true God. He is the source of everything and the Lord of life. Is there any false god or power that you are tempted to trust more than God? What things do you see others around you turning to as their source of strength and hope?

DAY 14

Doing the Work God Wants

(from *Prophets*, pages 159-160)

A regular part of Israel's life with God was to engage in certain religious practices. These were things that God himself had given to Israel as ways for the people to worship him. Especially since the exile to Babylon, God's people had been regularly fasting (going without food for a period of time) to show that as a nation they were sorry for their sins. But Isaiah tells the people that God sees a problem with their worship and fasting.



“Shout with the voice of a trumpet blast.

Shout aloud! Don't be timid.

Tell my people Israel of their sins!

Yet they act so pious!

They come to the Temple every day

and seem delighted to learn all about me.

They act like a righteous nation

that would never abandon the laws of its God.

They ask me to take action on their behalf,

pretending they want to be near me.

‘We have fasted before you!’ they say.

‘Why aren't you impressed?’

We have been very hard on ourselves,

and you don't even notice it!’

“I will tell you why!” I respond.

“It's because you are fasting to please yourselves.

Even while you fast,

you keep oppressing your workers.

What good is fasting

when you keep on fighting and quarreling?

This kind of fasting

will never get you anywhere with me.

You humble yourselves

by going through the motions of penance,

bowing your heads

like reeds bending in the wind.

You dress in burlap

and cover yourselves with ashes.

Is this what you call fasting?

Do you really think this will please the LORD?

“No, this is the kind of fasting I want:

Free those who are wrongly imprisoned;

lighten the burden of those who work for you.

Let the oppressed go free,

and remove the chains that bind people.

Share your food with the hungry,

and give shelter to the homeless.

Give clothes to those who need them,

and do not hide from relatives who need your help.

“Then your salvation will come like the dawn,

and your wounds will quickly heal.

Your godliness will lead you forward,

and the glory of the LORD will protect you from behind.

Then when you call, the LORD will answer.

‘Yes, I am here,’ he will quickly reply.

“Remove the heavy yoke of oppression.

Stop pointing your finger and spreading vicious rumors!

Feed the hungry,

and help those in trouble.

Then your light will shine out from the darkness,

and the darkness around you will be as bright as noon.

The LORD will guide you continually,

giving you water when you are dry

and restoring your strength.

You will be like a well-watered garden,

like an ever-flowing spring.

Some of you will rebuild the deserted ruins of your cities.

Then you will be known as a builder of walls

and a restorer of homes.

—*from the prophet Isaiah*

TALKING TOGETHER:

Gathering with God's people and praising him, worshiping him, and praying to him are good and right things to do. But God is looking for more. Just as in Isaiah's time, God is looking for a people who show allegiance to him by doing what he wants. He wants us to quit fighting with each other. He wants us to watch out for those who are poor and need help. He wants us to feed those who are hungry. He wants us to be fair and just with all people. What do you think will happen to our praise and worship when we also follow through on *doing* what God wants? Is there a connection between loving God and loving his world?

DAY 15**God Coming Home**

(from *Prophets*, pages 169-170, 172)

Do you remember the beginning of this story of God and the world? It tells us that God created the world to be his temple, his home. When humans rebelled against God and his good ways of living, then God withdrew from us. But he promised to come back, defeat evil, and make his home with us once again. The book of Isaiah ends with an urgent prayer for God to do just that. When God comes, wrongdoing and evil must be judged and destroyed so that the way is clear for God to heal and restore.



Oh, that you would burst from the heavens and come down!
 How the mountains would quake in your presence!
 As fire causes wood to burn
 and water to boil,
 your coming would make the nations tremble.
 Then your enemies would learn the reason for your
 fame!
 When you came down long ago,
 you did awesome deeds beyond our highest
 expectations.
 And oh, how the mountains quaked!
 For since the world began,
 no ear has heard

and no eye has seen a God like you,
 who works for those who wait for him!
 You welcome those who gladly do good,
 who follow godly ways.
 But you have been very angry with us,
 for we are not godly.
 We are constant sinners;
 how can people like us be saved?
 We are all infected and impure with sin.
 When we display our righteous deeds,
 they are nothing but filthy rags.
 Like autumn leaves, we wither and fall,
 and our sins sweep us away like the wind.
 Yet no one calls on your name
 or pleads with you for mercy.
 Therefore, you have turned away from us
 and turned us over to our sins.

And yet, O LORD, you are our Father.
 We are the clay, and you are the potter.
 We all are formed by your hand.
 Don't be so angry with us, LORD.
 Please don't remember our sins forever.
 Look at us, we pray,
 and see that we are all your people.
 Your holy cities are destroyed.
 Zion is a wilderness;
 yes, Jerusalem is a desolate ruin.
 The holy and beautiful Temple
 where our ancestors praised you
 has been burned down,
 and all the things of beauty are destroyed.
 After all this, LORD, must you still refuse to help us?
 Will you continue to be silent and punish us?

The LORD says, . . .

“Look! I am creating new heavens and a new earth,
 and no one will even think about the old ones anymore.
 Be glad; rejoice forever in my creation!
 And look! I will create Jerusalem as a place of happiness.
 Her people will be a source of joy.

I will rejoice over Jerusalem
and delight in my people.
And the sound of weeping and crying
will be heard in it no more. . . .

In those days people will live in the houses they build
and eat the fruit of their own vineyards.
Unlike the past, invaders will not take their houses
and confiscate their vineyards.
For my people will live as long as trees,
and my chosen ones will have time to enjoy their hard-won gains.
They will not work in vain,
and their children will not be doomed to misfortune.
For they are people blessed by the LORD,
and their children, too, will be blessed.
I will answer them before they even call to me.
While they are still talking about their needs,
I will go ahead and answer their prayers!
The wolf and the lamb will feed together.
The lion will eat hay like a cow.
But the snakes will eat dust.
In those days no one will be hurt or destroyed on my holy mountain.
I, the LORD, have spoken!”

—*from the prophet Isaiah*

TALKING TOGETHER:

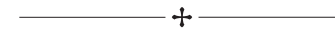
The story of God in the Bible tells us and shows us that God is about action. He created all things. He intervenes in history. He chose Abraham and his family. He rescued his people from slavery in Egypt. He judged the evil in Israel when the people needed that. And then he promised to end their exile and return to them. In all this, God has been faithful. Now Isaiah tells us one more promise: God will act in history again. What work does God still have to do in the world? What will he do at the end? What does it mean to you to hear that God will create “new heavens and a new earth”?

DAY 16

Darkness and Gloom, then Joy and Dancing

(from *Prophets*, pages 180, 183-184)

Throughout the writings of Israel’s ancient prophets we find references to “the day of the LORD.” The prophet Zephaniah was especially clear about this event. God promises to come to the earth in a future time to judge and then restore his people and his world. That day is first a day of darkness and pain because God is angry about all the evil and injustice in his world. He is angry about the reign of his enemies—sin and death. But God judges evil in order to remove it, allowing the world to regain all the beauty, life, and joy God meant for it to have.



“That terrible day of the LORD is near.
Swiftly it comes—
a day of bitter tears,
a day when even strong men will cry out.
It will be a day when the LORD’s anger is poured out—
a day of terrible distress and anguish,
a day of ruin and desolation,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and blackness,
a day of trumpet calls and battle cries.
Down go the walled cities
and the strongest battlements! . . .



“Then I will purify the speech of all people,
so that everyone can worship the LORD together.
My scattered people who live beyond the rivers of
Ethiopia
will come to present their offerings.
On that day you will no longer need to be ashamed,
for you will no longer be rebels against me.

I will remove all proud and arrogant people from among you.

There will be no more haughtiness on my holy mountain.
Those who are left will be the lowly and humble,
for it is they who trust in the name of the LORD.
The remnant of Israel will do no wrong;
they will never tell lies or deceive one another.
They will eat and sleep in safety,
and no one will make them afraid.”

Sing, O daughter of Zion;
shout aloud, O Israel!

Be glad and rejoice with all your heart,
O daughter of Jerusalem!

For the LORD will remove his hand of judgment
and will disperse the armies of your enemy.

And the LORD himself, the King of Israel,
will live among you!

At last your troubles will be over,
and you will never again fear disaster.

On that day the announcement to Jerusalem will be,
“Cheer up, Zion! Don’t be afraid!

For the LORD your God is living among you.
He is a mighty savior.

He will take delight in you with gladness.
With his love, he will calm all your fears.
He will rejoice over you with joyful songs.”

“I will gather you who mourn for the appointed festivals;
you will be disgraced no more.

And I will deal severely with all who have oppressed you.
I will save the weak and helpless ones;

I will bring together
those who were chased away.

I will give glory and fame to my former exiles,
wherever they have been mocked and shamed.

On that day I will gather you together
and bring you home again.

I will give you a good name, a name of distinction,
among all the nations of the earth,

as I restore your fortunes before their very eyes.
I, the LORD, have spoken!”

—from the prophet Zephaniah

TALKING TOGETHER:

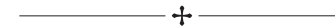
One key thing we learn here is that God’s faithful people in a proud and arrogant world are known for being humble. They quietly believe in God and trust him to do all that he has promised. They know that a time of great joy and gladness is coming, when God will return and make his home with us. Seeing people brag about themselves is a common thing in our culture. We are all tempted at times to think that we can take care of things ourselves, completely by our own strength and abilities. What can we do to help each other avoid this? How can we keep a more balanced and healthy view of ourselves?

DAY 17

Does God Care?

(from *Prophets*, pages 195, 197-199)

The prophet Habakkuk looked around and saw a society that was corrupt and violent. So he brings a complaint to God, asking him how long he’s going to put up with this. Habakkuk believes that God is a God of justice and fairness, so Habakkuk knows that sooner or later God must do something about what’s wrong in the world. This short book tells us both about Habakkuk’s protest and God’s response. As we’ve seen again and again in the prophets, the answer comes from remembering that God has acted for his people before and trusting that he will do it once more.



This is the message that the prophet Habakkuk received in a vision.



How long, O LORD, must I call for help?

But you do not listen!

“Violence is everywhere!” I cry,
but you do not come to save.

Must I forever see these evil deeds?

Why must I watch all this misery?
Wherever I look,

I see destruction and violence.

I am surrounded by people
 who love to argue and fight.
 The law has become paralyzed,
 and there is no justice in the courts.
 The wicked far outnumber the righteous,
 so that justice has become perverted. . . .

Then the LORD said to me,

“Write my answer plainly on tablets,
 so that a runner can carry the correct message to others.
 This vision is for a future time.
 It describes the end, and it will be fulfilled.
 If it seems slow in coming, wait patiently,
 for it will surely take place.
 It will not be delayed.

“Look at the proud!
 They trust in themselves, and their lives are crooked.
 But the righteous will live by their faithfulness to God.
 Wealth is treacherous,
 and the arrogant are never at rest.
 They open their mouths as wide as the grave,
 and like death, they are never satisfied.
 In their greed they have gathered up many nations
 and swallowed many peoples.

“But soon their captives will taunt them.
 They will mock them, saying,
 ‘What sorrow awaits you thieves!
 Now you will get what you deserve!
 You’ve become rich by extortion,
 but how much longer can this go on?’
 Suddenly, your debtors will take action.
 They will turn on you and take all you have,
 while you stand trembling and helpless.
 Because you have plundered many nations,
 now all the survivors will plunder you.
 You committed murder throughout the countryside
 and filled the towns with violence.

“What sorrow awaits you who build big houses
 with money gained dishonestly!
 You believe your wealth will buy security,
 putting your family’s nest beyond the reach of danger.

But by the murders you committed,
 you have shamed your name and forfeited your lives.
 The very stones in the walls cry out against you,
 and the beams in the ceilings echo the complaint.

“What sorrow awaits you who build cities
 with money gained through murder and corruption!
 Has not the LORD of Heaven’s Armies promised
 that the wealth of nations will turn to ashes?
 They work so hard,
 but all in vain!
 For as the waters fill the sea,
 the earth will be filled with an awareness
 of the glory of the LORD. . . .

+

This prayer was sung by the prophet Habakkuk:

I have heard all about you, LORD.
 I am filled with awe by your amazing works.
 In this time of our deep need,
 help us again as you did in years gone by.
 And in your anger,
 remember your mercy.

—*from the prophet Habakkuk*

TALKING TOGETHER:

It’s easy when we have plenty of money to start counting on money to be the answer to all of life’s problems. It’s also easy to fear the loss of that money and to be willing to do almost anything to keep it. This was a problem in Habakkuk’s time: People were cheating other people and even using violence to get more and more money. We also live in a society in which wealth is worshiped. What can we do as the people of God to prevent this from happening in our own lives and families? How can we keep our focus on God and what he will provide for our lives and well-being?

DAY 18

A Difficult Assignment

(from *Prophets*, pages 203-204)

To be a prophet was a difficult thing. It usually meant bringing a hard message to people who didn't want to hear it. The prophets were not popular people. In fact, they were often in danger. When the LORD called Jeremiah to be a prophet, Jeremiah was reluctant to accept the job. He knew it would be hard. And God confirmed that the leaders of God's people would indeed fight against Jeremiah and try to harm him. In a hard world, there is often hard work to do and a price to be paid by people who love what is good and right and true.



These are the words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiyah, one of the priests from the town of Anathoth in the land of Benjamin. The LORD first gave messages to Jeremiah during the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah son of Amon, king of Judah. The LORD's messages continued throughout the reign of King Jehoiakim, Josiah's son, until the eleventh year of the reign of King Zedekiah, another of Josiah's sons. In August of that eleventh year the people of Jerusalem were taken away as captives.



The LORD gave me this message:

"I knew you before I formed you in your mother's womb.

Before you were born I set you apart
and appointed you as my prophet to the nations."

"O Sovereign LORD," I said, "I can't speak for you! I'm too young!"

The LORD replied, "Don't say, 'I'm too young,' for you must go wherever I send you and say whatever I tell you. And don't be afraid of the people, for I will be with you and will protect you. I, the LORD, have spoken!" Then the LORD reached out and touched my mouth and said,

"Look, I have put my words in your mouth!

Today I appoint you to stand up
against nations and kingdoms.

Some you must uproot and tear down,
destroy and overthrow.
Others you must build up
and plant."

Then the LORD said to me, "Look, Jeremiah! What do you see?"

And I replied, "I see a branch from an almond tree."

And the LORD said, "That's right, and it means that I am watching, and I will certainly carry out all my plans."

Then the LORD spoke to me again and asked, "What do you see now?"

And I replied, "I see a pot of boiling water, spilling from the north."

"Yes," the LORD said, "for terror from the north will boil out on the people of this land. Listen! I am calling the armies of the kingdoms of the north to come to Jerusalem. I, the LORD, have spoken!"

"They will set their thrones
at the gates of the city.
They will attack its walls
and all the other towns of Judah.

I will pronounce judgment
on my people for all their evil—
for deserting me and burning incense to other gods.
Yes, they worship idols made with their own hands!

"Get up and prepare for action.

Go out and tell them everything I tell you to say.

Do not be afraid of them,
or I will make you look foolish in front of them.

For see, today I have made you strong
like a fortified city that cannot be captured,
like an iron pillar or a bronze wall.

You will stand against the whole land—
the kings, officials, priests, and people of Judah.

They will fight you, but they will fail.

For I am with you, and I will take care of you.
I, the LORD, have spoken!"

—*from the prophet Jeremiah*

TALKING TOGETHER:

The message Jeremiah brought was not easy for the people to hear. He spoke of coming judgment—an attack on Jerusalem—because the people were worshipping false gods. He spoke of international upheaval

and of the rise and fall of nations. In such rough times, it is sometimes easier to just keep quiet. Jeremiah struggled with his calling, and we learn in his book of prophecies that he was often depressed. God didn't promise it would be easy, but God did promise to stay with Jeremiah and to take care of him.

We, too, live in a hard world, a place where chaos and disorder often seem to rule. Being people of the truth is not easy, and sometimes we are also tempted to just withdraw and keep quiet. Do you think of yourself as brave when you face opposition? Is it easy or hard to remember that God is always with us, even in hardship? What are practical ways we can build each other up and encourage one another?

DAY 19

Assuming God Is on Your Side

(from *Prophets*, pages 218-220)

The people of God remembered the stories of how God's presence had personally come down and filled the Temple in Jerusalem. They knew that God had made his home there. This made them believe that God would never abandon it or allow anything bad to happen to it. So they thought they could do whatever they wanted and God wouldn't do anything. They thought Jerusalem was safe forever, even if they didn't live the way God wanted them to. As it turned out, they were wrong.



This is what the LORD says:

“Stop at the crossroads and look around.

Ask for the old, godly way, and walk in it.

Travel its path, and you will find rest for your souls.

But you reply, ‘No, that’s not the road we want!’

I posted watchmen over you who said,

‘Listen for the sound of the alarm.’

But you replied,

‘No! We won’t pay attention!’ . . .

The LORD gave another message to Jeremiah. He said, “Go to the entrance of the LORD’s Temple, and give this message to the people: ‘O Judah, listen

to this message from the LORD! Listen to it, all of you who worship here! This is what the LORD of Heaven’s Armies, the God of Israel, says:

“Even now, if you quit your evil ways, I will let you stay in your own land. But don’t be fooled by those who promise you safety simply because the LORD’s Temple is here. They chant, ‘The LORD’s Temple is here! The LORD’s Temple is here!’ But I will be merciful only if you stop your evil thoughts and deeds and start treating each other with justice; only if you stop exploiting foreigners, orphans, and widows; only if you stop your murdering; and only if you stop harming yourselves by worshiping idols. Then I will let you stay in this land that I gave to your ancestors to keep forever.

“Don’t be fooled into thinking that you will never suffer because the Temple is here. It’s a lie! Do you really think you can steal, murder, commit adultery, lie, and burn incense to Baal and all those other new gods of yours, and then come here and stand before me in my Temple and chant, ‘We are safe!’—only to go right back to all those evils again? Don’t you yourselves admit that this Temple, which bears my name, has become a den of thieves? Surely I see all the evil going on there. I, the LORD, have spoken!

“Go now to the place at Shiloh where I once put the Tabernacle that bore my name. See what I did there because of all the wickedness of my people, the Israelites. While you were doing these wicked things, says the LORD, I spoke to you about it repeatedly, but you would not listen. I called out to you, but you refused to answer. So just as I destroyed Shiloh, I will now destroy this Temple that bears my name, this Temple that you trust in for help, this place that I gave to you and your ancestors. And I will send you out of my sight into exile, just as I did your relatives, the people of Israel.”

—*from the prophet Jeremiah*

TALKING TOGETHER:

The goal of all God’s work in the long story of the Bible is transformation. God is working to change the character of his people, and then all people, so that the original intention for his creation can be reached. This is why it isn’t enough to simply believe that God exists. He is looking for our allegiance to him, our commitment to follow him.

When his people in history had worship services for him but ignored what he said about righteous living, he told them he was looking for more: transformation, obedience, faithful living. Do you think God’s people are tempted to do the same thing today? What can we do together to prevent this way of thinking from happening?

DAY 20

Is There Good News after the Bad News?

(from *Prophets*, pages 232-233, 235)

In a last, desperate plea, God asks his people to reconsider. If they turn to him, he will forgive them and disaster will be avoided. God's heart is still open to them, if only they will listen, repent, and change. But they do not hear and will not change, so sorrow is coming for them. Then a new question arises: Is this judgment the last word for God's people?



Listen and pay attention!

Do not be arrogant, for the LORD has spoken.
Give glory to the LORD your God
before it is too late.

Acknowledge him before he brings darkness upon you,
causing you to stumble and fall on the darkening
mountains.

For then, when you look for light,
you will find only terrible darkness and gloom.

And if you still refuse to listen,
I will weep alone because of your pride.

My eyes will overflow with tears,
because the LORD's flock will be led away into exile.

Say to the king and his mother,
"Come down from your thrones
and sit in the dust,

for your glorious crowns
will soon be snatched from your heads."

The towns of the Negev will close their gates,
and no one will be able to open them.

The people of Judah will be taken away as captives.
All will be carried into exile.

Open up your eyes and see
the armies marching down from the north!

Where is your flock—
your beautiful flock—
that he gave you to care for?
What will you say when the LORD takes the allies you have
cultivated
and appoints them as your rulers?

Pangs of anguish will grip you,
like those of a woman in labor!

You may ask yourself,
"Why is all this happening to me?"

It is because of your many sins!
That is why you have been stripped
and raped by invading armies.

Can an Ethiopian change the color of his skin?

Can a leopard take away its spots?
Neither can you start doing good,
for you have always done evil.

"I will scatter you like chaff
that is blown away by the desert winds.

This is your allotment,
the portion I have assigned to you,"
says the LORD,

"for you have forgotten me,
putting your trust in false gods.

I myself will strip you
and expose you to shame.

I have seen your adultery and lust,
and your disgusting idol worship out in the fields and on the hills.

What sorrow awaits you, Jerusalem!
How long before you are pure?" . . .

LORD, have you completely rejected Judah?
Do you really hate Jerusalem?

Why have you wounded us past all hope of healing?
We hoped for peace, but no peace came.

We hoped for a time of healing, but found only terror.

LORD, we confess our wickedness
and that of our ancestors, too.

We all have sinned against you.

For the sake of your reputation, LORD, do not abandon us.
Do not disgrace your own glorious throne.

Please remember us,
and do not break your covenant with us.

—*from the prophet Jeremiah*

TALKING TOGETHER:

One of the key questions within the story of the Bible is about human freedom. Since God has given human creatures the ability to freely choose the course and direction of their lives, how can God make sure that things will turn out well? God promised at the very beginning that he wouldn't do the work of redeeming the world without humans. His intention is to always work in partnership with us. So what happens when humans can't or won't uphold their end of the partnership? What happens when God's people are unfaithful to their covenant with God? Can God still hold the covenant together? Can God overcome human rebellion?

DAY 21

Jeremiah in Trouble

(from *Prophets*, pages 242-243)

Ever since God first chose Abraham and his family, God and his people have struggled together. God made a covenant with them and invited them into deep relationship. God intended for them to properly worship him, follow his ways of living, and be a light to the world. But God's people Israel didn't seem up to the task, though God kept trying and trying to work with them.



The LORD gave another message to Jeremiah. He said, "Go down to the potter's shop, and I will speak to you there." So I did as he told me and found the potter working at his wheel. But the jar he was making did not turn out as he had hoped, so he crushed it into a lump of clay again and started over.

Then the LORD gave me this message: "O Israel, can I not do to you as this potter has done to his clay? As the clay is in the potter's hand, so

are you in my hand. If I announce that a certain nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down, and destroyed, but then that nation renounces its evil ways, I will not destroy it as I had planned. And if I announce that I will plant and build up a certain nation or kingdom, but then that nation turns to evil and refuses to obey me, I will not bless it as I said I would.

"Therefore, Jeremiah, go and warn all Judah and Jerusalem. Say to them, 'This is what the LORD says: I am planning disaster for you instead of good. So turn from your evil ways, each of you, and do what is right.'"

But the people replied, "Don't waste your breath. We will continue to live as we want to, stubbornly following our own evil desires."

So this is what the LORD says:

"Has anyone ever heard of such a thing,
even among the pagan nations?

My virgin daughter Israel

has done something terrible!

Does the snow ever disappear from the mountaintops of Lebanon?

Do the cold streams flowing from those distant mountains ever run
dry?

But my people are not so reliable, for they have deserted me;
they burn incense to worthless idols.

They have stumbled off the ancient highways
and walk in muddy paths.

Therefore, their land will become desolate,
a monument to their stupidity.

All who pass by will be astonished
and will shake their heads in amazement.

I will scatter my people before their enemies
as the east wind scatters dust.

And in all their trouble I will turn my back on them
and refuse to notice their distress."

Then the people said, "Come on, let's plot a way to stop Jeremiah. We have plenty of priests and wise men and prophets. We don't need him to teach the word and give us advice and prophecies. Let's spread rumors about him and ignore what he says."

LORD, hear me and help me!

Listen to what my enemies are
saying.

Should they repay evil for good?

They have dug a pit to kill me,

though I pleaded for them
and tried to protect them from your anger.

—*from the prophet Jeremiah*

TALKING TOGETHER:

Telling the truth to people in powerful positions can be very dangerous. This is what Jeremiah did, and the danger for him was very real. He was mocked, hated, and accused of treason against the nation. At one point he was thrown into a pit and nearly died. All of this caused him feelings of despair. Yet Jeremiah remained faithful to God and his calling to be a prophet. He kept speaking the truth. God was working through him, in spite of Jeremiah's own weakness and even depression. Does opposition mean that we are not doing the right thing? Will God always protect us from people who want to hurt us? Do you think God can work through us in spite of our weaknesses?

DAY 22

A New Way Forward

(from *Prophets*, pages 262-265)

Right in the center of the book of Jeremiah's prophecies we find a powerful and clear word of hope and renewal. Many of Jeremiah's words have been very hard. But here we are given a vision of where this story is going. This story is headed toward the work of God to save, to heal, to bring his people home, and to feast with them. And how will this happen? How can God overcome hard human hearts?



Now this is what the LORD says:

"Sing with joy for Israel.

Shout for the greatest of nations!

Shout out with praise and joy:

'Save your people, O LORD,
the remnant of Israel!'

For I will bring them from the north

and from the distant corners of the earth.

I will not forget the blind and lame,
the expectant mothers and women in labor.

A great company will return!

Tears of joy will stream down their faces,
and I will lead them home with great care.

They will walk beside quiet streams
and on smooth paths where they will not stumble.

For I am Israel's father,
and Ephraim is my oldest child.

"Listen to this message from the LORD,
you nations of the world;

proclaim it in distant coastlands:

The LORD, who scattered his people,
will gather them and watch over them
as a shepherd does his flock.

For the LORD has redeemed Israel
from those too strong for them.

They will come home and sing songs of joy on the heights of
Jerusalem.

They will be radiant because of the LORD's good gifts—
the abundant crops of grain, new wine, and olive oil,
and the healthy flocks and herds.

Their life will be like a watered garden,
and all their sorrows will be gone.

The young women will dance for joy,
and the men—old and young—will join in the celebration.

I will turn their mourning into joy.

I will comfort them and exchange their sorrow for
rejoicing.

The priests will enjoy abundance,
and my people will feast on my good gifts.

I, the LORD, have spoken!" . . .

This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says:
"When I bring them back from captivity, the people of Judah and its towns
will again say, 'The LORD bless you, O righteous home, O holy mountain!'
Townspersons and farmers and shepherds alike will live together in peace
and happiness. For I have given rest to the weary and joy to the sorrowing."

At this, I woke up and looked around. My sleep had been very sweet.

"The day is coming," says the LORD, "when I will greatly increase the
human population and the number of animals here in Israel and Judah. In
the past I deliberately uprooted and tore down this nation. I overthrew it,

destroyed it, and brought disaster upon it. But in the future I will just as deliberately plant it and build it up. I, the LORD, have spoken!

“The people will no longer quote this proverb:

‘The parents have eaten sour grapes,
but their children’s mouths pucker at the taste.’

All people will die for their own sins—those who eat the sour grapes will be the ones whose mouths will pucker.

“The day is coming,” says the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. This covenant will not be like the one I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and brought them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant, though I loved them as a husband loves his wife,” says the LORD.

“But this is the new covenant I will make with the people of Israel after those days,” says the LORD. “I will put my instructions deep within them, and I will write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. And they will not need to teach their neighbors, nor will they need to teach their relatives, saying, ‘You should know the LORD.’ For everyone, from the least to the greatest, will know me already,” says the LORD. “And I will forgive their wickedness, and I will never again remember their sins.”

—*from the prophet Jeremiah*

TALKING TOGETHER:

The key to Jeremiah’s promise of a new covenant coming is the promise of the transformation of the human heart. The ongoing story of people struggling to live well in the biblical story has to do with a sickness in the human soul. What we learn in the Bible is that until this deep problem is dealt with, the story of humans in the world will not get better. This is why Jeremiah’s words sing to us: God himself will come and change our hearts. He will write his ways and his truth within us. Say a prayer of thanksgiving today, expressing gratitude for God’s amazing work to transform us from the inside out.

DAY 23

The Sacred Gift of God’s Word

(from *Prophets*, pages 272-274)

Sometimes we might think that the authors of the books of the Bible are like authors today. We picture one person sitting down and writing out their book until they’re finished. But in the following story we get a more accurate picture of how biblical books—many of them—actually came together. Jeremiah wasn’t an author. He was an active prophet, publicly speaking the messages God gave him in places like the Temple or the entrance to the city. He did this over a long period of time.

It was only later that a scribe (someone who specialized in reading and writing) wrote down all the messages Jeremiah had been giving; his name was Baruch. The entire Bible came together slowly over many, many centuries, but God was working through all the human authors and editors, so this truly is God’s story.



During the fourth year that Jehoiakim son of Josiah was king in Judah, the LORD gave this message to Jeremiah: “Get a scroll, and write down all my messages against Israel, Judah, and the other nations. Begin with the first message back in the days of Josiah, and write down every message, right up to the present time. Perhaps the people of Judah will repent when they hear again all the terrible things I have planned for them. Then I will be able to forgive their sins and wrongdoings.”

So Jeremiah sent for Baruch son of Neriah, and as Jeremiah dictated all the prophecies that the LORD had given him, Baruch wrote them on a scroll. Then Jeremiah said to Baruch, “I am a prisoner here and unable to go to the Temple. So you go to the Temple on the next day of fasting, and read the messages from the LORD that I have had you write on this scroll. Read them so the people who are there from all over Judah will hear them. Perhaps even yet they will turn from their evil ways and ask the LORD’s forgiveness before it is too late. For the LORD has threatened them with his terrible anger.”

Baruch did as Jeremiah told him and read these messages from the LORD to the people at the Temple. He did this on a day of sacred fasting held in late autumn, during the fifth year of the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah.

People from all over Judah had come to Jerusalem to attend the services at the Temple on that day. Baruch read Jeremiah's words on the scroll to all the people. He stood in front of the Temple room of Gemariah, son of Shaphan the secretary. This room was just off the upper courtyard of the Temple, near the New Gate entrance. . . .

"Sit down and read the scroll to us," the officials said, and Baruch did as they requested.

When they heard all the messages, they looked at one another in alarm. "We must tell the king what we have heard," they said to Baruch. "But first, tell us how you got these messages. Did they come directly from Jeremiah?"

So Baruch explained, "Jeremiah dictated them, and I wrote them down in ink, word for word, on this scroll."

"You and Jeremiah should both hide," the officials told Baruch. "Don't tell anyone where you are!" Then the officials left the scroll for safekeeping in the room of Elishama the secretary and went to tell the king what had happened.

The king sent Jehudi to get the scroll. Jehudi brought it from Elishama's room and read it to the king as all his officials stood by. It was late autumn, and the king was in a winterized part of the palace, sitting in front of a fire to keep warm. Each time Jehudi finished reading three or four columns, the king took a knife and cut off that section of the scroll. He then threw it into the fire, section by section, until the whole scroll was burned up. Neither the king nor his attendants showed any signs of fear or repentance at what they heard. Even when Elnathan, Delaiah, and Gemariah begged the king not to burn the scroll, he wouldn't listen.

Then the king commanded his son Jerahmeel, Seraiah son of Azriel, and Shelemiah son of Abdeel to arrest Baruch and Jeremiah. But the LORD had hidden them.

After the king had burned the scroll on which Baruch had written Jeremiah's words, the LORD gave Jeremiah another message. He said, "Get another scroll, and write everything again just as you did on the scroll King Jehoiakim burned. Then say to the king, 'This is what the LORD says: You burned the scroll because it said the king of Babylon would destroy this land and empty it of people and animals. Now this is what the LORD says about King Jehoiakim of Judah: He will have no heirs to sit on the throne of David. His dead body will be thrown out to lie unburied—exposed to the heat of the day and the frost of the night. I will punish him and his family and his attendants for their sins. I will pour out on them and on all the people of Jerusalem and Judah all the disasters I promised, for they would not listen to my warnings.'"

So Jeremiah took another scroll and dictated again to his secretary,

Baruch. He wrote everything that had been on the scroll King Jehoiakim had burned in the fire. Only this time he added much more!

—*from the prophet Jeremiah*

TALKING TOGETHER:

Through the Bible's long history, many people have opposed it and tried to stop people from having it or reading it. But the holy Scriptures are part of God's mission to the world. They are the way God has chosen to tell us what he's up to and how he's working to restore his relationship with us and heal our world. Without the Bible we don't know what big Story our lives are a part of. Even though there are those who dismiss the Bible or discredit it, God will ensure that it continues to do his work. God's word cannot be chained. What has your experience reading the Bible been like? What impact has it had on your life with God? Can you summarize the big Story of the Bible?

DAY 24

The Cup of the Lord's Anger

(from *Prophets*, pages 284-285)

Sometimes we might struggle to understand why God is so angry about all the wrongdoing he sees on the earth. But very early in the Bible's story we are given insight into this. God has looked down on the world he made and seen that people have embraced evil deeply. They have filled the earth with violence. They cheat and hurt and even kill each other. The world he created has become a place of injustice and corruption, something he never intended for it.

This hurts God so much, the Bible says it breaks God's heart. God's anger in the Bible is about this pain and about his longing to see healing and restoration. God's anger is in the service of his justice. And the coming of his justice will bring everlasting joy.



This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, said to me: "Take from my hand this cup filled to the brim with my anger, and make all the nations to whom

I send you drink from it. When they drink from it, they will stagger, crazed by the warfare I will send against them.”

So I took the cup of anger from the LORD and made all the nations drink from it—every nation to which the LORD sent me. I went to Jerusalem and the other towns of Judah, and their kings and officials drank from the cup. From that day until this, they have been a desolate ruin, an object of horror, contempt, and cursing. I gave the cup to Pharaoh, king of Egypt, his attendants, his officials, and all his people, along with all the foreigners living in that land. I also gave it to all the kings of the land of Uz and the kings of the Philistine cities of Ashkelon, Gaza, Ekron, and what remains of Ashdod. Then I gave the cup to the nations of Edom, Moab, and Ammon, and the kings of Tyre and Sidon, and the kings of the regions across the sea. I gave it to Dedan, Tema, and Buz, and to the people who live in distant places. I gave it to the kings of Arabia, the kings of the nomadic tribes of the desert, and to the kings of Zimri, Elam, and Media. And I gave it to the kings of the northern countries, far and near, one after the other—all the kingdoms of the world. And finally, the king of Babylon himself drank from the cup of the LORD’s anger. . . .

“Now prophesy all these things, and say to them,

““The LORD will roar against his own land
from his holy dwelling in heaven.
He will shout like those who tread grapes;
he will shout against everyone on earth.
His cry of judgment will reach the ends of the earth,
for the LORD will bring his case against all the nations.
He will judge all the people of the earth,
slaughtering the wicked with the sword.
I, the LORD, have spoken!”

This is what the LORD of Heaven’s Armies says:

“Look! Disaster will fall upon nation after nation!
A great whirlwind of fury is rising
from the most distant corners of the earth!”

—*from the prophet Jeremiah*

TALKING TOGETHER:

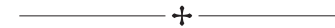
What makes you angry? How do you handle it when you get mad about something? Do you get angry about the same things God does? What can we do so our anger about wrongdoing, injustice, and evil leads to more good in the world?

DAY 25

Is Israel’s Story Over?

(from *Prophets*, pages 308-310)

The ending of the story of God’s people in the land of Judah is painful to read. Despite all the warnings of Jeremiah and all the other prophets, the kings of Israel and Judah continued to go their own ways. So judgment came, executed through the armies of Babylon. It looks for all the world like God’s attempt to bring salvation into the world through Abraham’s family has failed. There is nothing left: no Temple, no Jerusalem, no king reigning over God’s people. What has happened to all the promises God made? What about the covenant with his people? What about the promise to King David about having a descendant who will rule forever?



Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem eleven years. His mother was Hamutal, the daughter of Jeremiah from Libnah. But Zedekiah did what was evil in the LORD’s sight, just as Jehoiakim had done. These things happened because of the LORD’s anger against the people of Jerusalem and Judah, until he finally banished them from his presence and sent them into exile.

Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon. So on January 15, during the ninth year of Zedekiah’s reign, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon led his entire army against Jerusalem. They surrounded the city and built siege ramps against its walls. Jerusalem was kept under siege until the eleventh year of King Zedekiah’s reign.

By July 18 in the eleventh year of Zedekiah’s reign, the famine in the city had become very severe, and the last of the food was entirely gone. Then a section of the city wall was broken down, and all the soldiers fled. Since the city was surrounded by the Babylonians, they waited for nightfall. Then they slipped through the gate between the two walls behind the king’s garden and headed toward the Jordan Valley.

But the Babylonian troops chased King Zedekiah and overtook him on the plains of Jericho, for his men had all deserted him and scattered. They captured the king and took him to the king of Babylon at Riblah in the land of Hamath. There the king of Babylon pronounced judgment upon

Zedekiah. The king of Babylon made Zedekiah watch as he slaughtered his sons. He also slaughtered all the officials of Judah at Riblah. Then he gouged out Zedekiah's eyes and bound him in bronze chains, and the king of Babylon led him away to Babylon. Zedekiah remained there in prison until the day of his death.

On August 17 of that year, which was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar's reign, Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard and an official of the Babylonian king, arrived in Jerusalem. He burned down the Temple of the LORD, the royal palace, and all the houses of Jerusalem. He destroyed all the important buildings in the city. Then he supervised the entire Babylonian army as they tore down the walls of Jerusalem on every side. Then Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard, took as exiles some of the poorest of the people, the rest of the people who remained in the city, the defectors who had declared their allegiance to the king of Babylon, and the rest of the craftsmen. But Nebuzaradan allowed some of the poorest people to stay behind to care for the vineyards and fields. . . .

In the thirty-seventh year of the exile of King Jehoiachin of Judah, Evil-merodach ascended to the Babylonian throne. He was kind to Jehoiachin and released him from prison on March 31 of that year. He spoke kindly to Jehoiachin and gave him a higher place than all the other exiled kings in Babylon. He supplied Jehoiachin with new clothes to replace his prison garb and allowed him to dine in the king's presence for the rest of his life. So the Babylonian king gave him a regular food allowance as long as he lived. This continued until the day of his death.

—*from the prophet Jeremiah*

TALKING TOGETHER:

The pain was intense. It was agonizing for the people of Jerusalem to see their city burned to the ground, their homes destroyed, and the Temple of God taken apart. Their last king, Zedekiah, was captured trying to escape and taken as a prisoner to Babylon. All seemed lost. But not quite everything was lost. One royal descendant of King David remained: Jehoiachin. He was released from prison, treated well, and even allowed to eat at the table of Babylon's king. God had judged his people for not being loyal to him, but he had not completely destroyed them. Only a sliver of hope remained. But from this small hope, God would rebuild his people and continue their story.

The hardest time to believe is when all seems lost. Talk together about how difficult it is to have hope when it doesn't look like anything

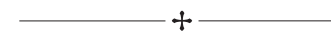
good can happen. Is there a difference between unrealistic hope and true faith? How important is it to know that God is the ultimate reason for our hope?

DAY 26

Brotherly Conflict

(from *Prophets*, pages 313-315)

Jacob and Esau were brothers—twin grandsons of Israel's ancestor Abraham. But there was conflict between them from the start. Two nations came from these brothers—Israel from Jacob, and Edom from Esau. The small book of Obadiah is a prophecy against Edom, both because of the nation's smug pride and because the Edomites turned on the Israelites when they were being attacked by Babylon. Again we see that God is king over all the nations.



This is the vision that the Sovereign LORD revealed to Obadiah concerning the land of Edom.

We have heard a message from the LORD
that an ambassador was sent to the nations to say,
“Get ready, everyone!
Let's assemble our armies and attack Edom!”

The LORD says to Edom,
“I will cut you down to size among the nations;
you will be greatly despised.
You have been deceived by your own pride
because you live in a rock fortress
and make your home high in the mountains.
‘Who can ever reach us way up here?’
you ask boastfully.
But even if you soar as high as eagles
and build your nest among the stars,
I will bring you crashing down,”
says the LORD. . . .

“Because of the violence you did
to your close relatives in Israel,
you will be filled with shame
and destroyed forever.
When they were invaded,
you stood aloof, refusing to help them.
Foreign invaders carried off their wealth
and cast lots to divide up Jerusalem,
but you acted like one of Israel’s enemies.

“You should not have gloated
when they exiled your relatives to distant lands.
You should not have rejoiced
when the people of Judah suffered such misfortune.
You should not have spoken arrogantly
in that terrible time of trouble.
You should not have plundered the land of Israel
when they were suffering such calamity.
You should not have gloated over their destruction
when they were suffering such calamity.
You should not have seized their wealth
when they were suffering such calamity.
You should not have stood at the crossroads,
killing those who tried to escape.
You should not have captured the survivors
and handed them over in their terrible time of trouble. . . .

“But Jerusalem will become a refuge for those who escape;
it will be a holy place.
And the people of Israel will come back
to reclaim their inheritance.
The people of Israel will be a raging fire,
and Edom a field of dry stubble.
The descendants of Joseph will be a flame
roaring across the field, devouring everything.
There will be no survivors in Edom.
I, the LORD, have spoken!

“Then my people living in the Negev
will occupy the mountains of Edom.
Those living in the foothills of Judah
will possess the Philistine plains
and take over the fields of Ephraim and Samaria.

And the people of Benjamin
will occupy the land of Gilead.
The exiles of Israel will return to their land
and occupy the Phoenician coast as far north as Zarephath.
The captives from Jerusalem exiled in the north
will return home and resettle the towns of the Negev.
Those who have been rescued will go up to Mount Zion in Jerusalem
to rule over the mountains of Edom.
And the LORD himself will be king!”

—*from the prophet Obadiah*

TALKING TOGETHER:

Pride is one of humanity’s greatest temptations. The nation of Edom thought they were invincible, that no one could attack and defeat them. And when they saw their neighbor Judah being conquered by the Babylonians, they took advantage of the situation for themselves. Throughout human history we’ve seen this again and again—nations and empires thinking that they are the greatest and that they will last forever. But they won’t. Only God’s Kingdom will last forever. Pray for the nations of the world today, that all of them will come to know the one true God.

DAY 27

Eating God’s Words of Sorrow

(from *Prophets*, pages 320-321)

As it was with Jeremiah, so it was with Ezekiel—being a prophet is hard work. Ezekiel prophesied at the same time as Jeremiah, but his messages were not for the people in Jerusalem or Judah; rather, they were for the exiles who had already been taken to Babylon. Ezekiel was from a priestly family, so he was especially interested in issues of purity and right worship, along with the Temple itself, which was the sign of God’s presence among his people. Ezekiel’s message was first a sad one because of what was being lost. But in the end God is always about what’s on the other side of sadness.



“Stand up, son of man,” said the voice. “I want to speak with you.” The Spirit came into me as he spoke, and he set me on my feet. I listened carefully to his words. “Son of man,” he said, “I am sending you to the nation of Israel, a rebellious nation that has rebelled against me. They and their ancestors have been rebelling against me to this very day. They are a stubborn and hard-hearted people. But I am sending you to say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says!’ And whether they listen or refuse to listen—for remember, they are rebels—at least they will know they have had a prophet among them.

“Son of man, do not fear them or their words. Don’t be afraid even though their threats surround you like nettles and briars and stinging scorpions. Do not be dismayed by their dark scowls, even though they are rebels. You must give them my messages whether they listen or not. But they won’t listen, for they are completely rebellious! Son of man, listen to what I say to you. Do not join them in their rebellion. Open your mouth, and eat what I give you.”

Then I looked and saw a hand reaching out to me. It held a scroll, which he unrolled. And I saw that both sides were covered with funeral songs, words of sorrow, and pronouncements of doom.

The voice said to me, “Son of man, eat what I am giving you—eat this scroll! Then go and give its message to the people of Israel.” So I opened my mouth, and he fed me the scroll. “Fill your stomach with this,” he said. And when I ate it, it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth.

Then he said, “Son of man, go to the people of Israel and give them my messages. I am not sending you to a foreign people whose language you cannot understand. No, I am not sending you to people with strange and difficult speech. If I did, they would listen! But the people of Israel won’t listen to you any more than they listen to me! For the whole lot of them are hard-hearted and stubborn. But look, I have made you as obstinate and hard-hearted as they are. I have made your forehead as hard as the hardest rock! So don’t be afraid of them or fear their angry looks, even though they are rebels.”

Then he added, “Son of man, let all my words sink deep into your own heart first. Listen to them carefully for yourself. Then go to your people in exile and say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says!’ Do this whether they listen to you or not.”

Then the Spirit lifted me up, and I heard a loud rumbling sound behind me. (May the glory of the LORD be praised in his place!) It was the sound of the wings of the living beings as they brushed against each other and the rumbling of their wheels beneath them.

The Spirit lifted me up and took me away. I went in bitterness and turmoil, but the LORD’s hold on me was strong. Then I came to the colony of Judean exiles in Tel-abib, beside the Kebar River. I was overwhelmed and sat among them for seven days.

—*from the prophet Ezekiel*

TALKING TOGETHER:

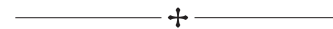
When Ezekiel saw the messages from God in his vision and then ate that scroll, it was a symbol of those messages going deep into Ezekiel so he could then share them with God’s people who were in exile. We too have the opportunity to take in more of God’s messages to his people. What happens when we feast on God’s word today? What is it like to read the Bible in big parts, not just single verses from here and there? Can we get a truer sense of the whole story of God? How could this help us learn to play our own part in that story?

DAY 28

When God Leaves

(from *Prophets*, pages 327-328, 331)

One of the most devastating visions that Ezekiel saw was the departure of the LORD from his own home in the Temple. God himself had been living right in the midst of his people. But now Ezekiel saw the LORD’s presence leaving the Temple. This is because God’s people had put an image of a false god—an idol—within the Temple itself. Ezekiel is teaching the exiles just how deep the sin of their people had gone. They had completely failed to live up to the covenant.



Then on September 17, during the sixth year of King Jehoiachin’s captivity, while the leaders of Judah were in my home, the Sovereign LORD took hold of me. I saw a figure that appeared to be a man. From what appeared to be his waist down, he looked like a burning flame. From the waist up he looked like gleaming amber. He reached out what seemed to be a hand and took me by the hair. Then the Spirit lifted me up into the sky and

transported me to Jerusalem in a vision from God. I was taken to the north gate of the inner courtyard of the Temple, where there is a large idol that has made the LORD very jealous. Suddenly, the glory of the God of Israel was there, just as I had seen it before in the valley.

Then the LORD said to me, “Son of man, look toward the north.” So I looked, and there to the north, beside the entrance to the gate near the altar, stood the idol that had made the LORD so jealous.

“Son of man,” he said, “do you see what they are doing? Do you see the detestable sins the people of Israel are committing to drive me from my Temple? . . .

Then this message came to me from the LORD: “Son of man, the people still left in Jerusalem are talking about you and your relatives and all the people of Israel who are in exile. They are saying, ‘Those people are far away from the LORD, so now he has given their land to us!’

“Therefore, tell the exiles, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Although I have scattered you in the countries of the world, I will be a sanctuary to you during your time in exile. I, the Sovereign LORD, will gather you back from the nations where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel once again.’

“When the people return to their homeland, they will remove every trace of their vile images and detestable idols. And I will give them singleness of heart and put a new spirit within them. I will take away their stony, stubborn heart and give them a tender, responsive heart, so they will obey my decrees and regulations. Then they will truly be my people, and I will be their God. But as for those who long for vile images and detestable idols, I will repay them fully for their sins. I, the Sovereign LORD, have spoken!”

Then the cherubim lifted their wings and rose into the air with their wheels beside them, and the glory of the God of Israel hovered above them. Then the glory of the LORD went up from the city and stopped above the mountain to the east.

Afterward the Spirit of God carried me back again to Babylonia, to the people in exile there. And so ended the vision of my visit to Jerusalem. And I told the exiles everything the LORD had shown me.

—*from the prophet Ezekiel*

TALKING TOGETHER:

In the midst of disaster, there is still hope. God’s Spirit had left the Temple in Jerusalem, but God was still making promises to the people.

Although they would have to remain in exile for a long time, God would protect them there. And he would bring them home one day.

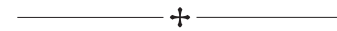
Just as we saw in Jeremiah’s prophecy, here in Ezekiel we see the same promise from God to soften hard hearts so the people could return to him. This great work happened later, through the coming of Jesus and the pouring out of God’s Spirit on his people. In God’s Story we are called to be fully engaged and active participants. But a key lesson from Israel’s prophets is that when we try to do this alone, without God’s help, we are lost. What can we do to cooperate with the work of God’s Spirit in our lives?

DAY 29

Turn, and You Will Live

(from *Prophets*, pages 341-342)

In the ancient world it was common to think that bad things would happen to the next generation when a previous generation had sinned. One of the messages that Ezekiel received from God had to do with this belief. Now God corrects the idea that he is punishing people for things they did not do. Instead, those who do wrong will be judged for their own actions, and God will restore and give life to those who faithfully follow him. For the exiles in Babylon, this was good news: that if they turn and follow the LORD, then they will live.



Then another message came to me from the LORD: “Why do you quote this proverb concerning the land of Israel: ‘The parents have eaten sour grapes, but their children’s mouths pucker at the taste’? As surely as I live, says the Sovereign LORD, you will not quote this proverb anymore in Israel. For all people are mine to judge—both parents and children alike. And this is my rule: The person who sins is the one who will die.

“Suppose a certain man is righteous and does what is just and right. . . . Anyone who does these things is just and will surely live, says the Sovereign LORD.

“But suppose that man has a son who grows up to be a robber or murderer and refuses to do what is right. And that son does all the evil things

his father would never do—he worships idols on the mountains, commits adultery, oppresses the poor and helpless, steals from debtors by refusing to let them redeem their security, worships idols, commits detestable sins, and lends money at excessive interest. Should such a sinful person live? No! He must die and must take full blame.

“But suppose that sinful son, in turn, has a son who sees his father’s wickedness and decides against that kind of life. This son refuses to worship idols on the mountains and does not commit adultery. He does not exploit the poor, but instead is fair to debtors and does not rob them. He gives food to the hungry and provides clothes for the needy. He helps the poor, does not lend money at interest, and obeys all my regulations and decrees. Such a person will not die because of his father’s sins; he will surely live. But the father will die for his many sins—for being cruel, robbing people, and doing what was clearly wrong among his people.

“‘What?’ you ask. ‘Doesn’t the child pay for the parent’s sins?’ No! For if the child does what is just and right and keeps my decrees, that child will surely live. The person who sins is the one who will die. The child will not be punished for the parent’s sins, and the parent will not be punished for the child’s sins. Righteous people will be rewarded for their own righteous behavior, and wicked people will be punished for their own wickedness. But if wicked people turn away from all their sins and begin to obey my decrees and do what is just and right, they will surely live and not die. All their past sins will be forgotten, and they will live because of the righteous things they have done.

“Do you think that I like to see wicked people die? says the Sovereign LORD. Of course not! I want them to turn from their wicked ways and live. However, if righteous people turn from their righteous behavior and start doing sinful things and act like other sinners, should they be allowed to live? No, of course not! All their righteous acts will be forgotten, and they will die for their sins. . . .

“Therefore, I will judge each of you, O people of Israel, according to your actions, says the Sovereign LORD. Repent, and turn from your sins. Don’t let them destroy you! Put all your rebellion behind you, and find yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O people of Israel? I don’t want you to die, says the Sovereign LORD. Turn back and live!”

—*from the prophet Ezekiel*

TALKING TOGETHER:

One thing we see with crystal clarity here is that it hurts God when people turn away from him and ignore his good path. God wants all

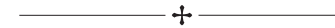
people to live—to know him, worship him, and follow him. God has given his creatures freedom. May we use that freedom well to choose him and know the life that is truly life. How are you using your freedom? Does it make a difference knowing that God loves you and wants you to know him and to live well?

DAY 30

Time to Face the Consequences

(from *Prophets*, pages 348, 350)

Some of the Judean exiles in Babylon were thinking that they would quickly be allowed to return to their own land. But Ezekiel reminds them that this punishment was a long time coming. God had sent his prophets to warn the people of the consequences of their wrongdoing and rebellion, but the people had not listened. They continued to sin and to ignore God’s instructions. So God was intervening by removing their king and destroying their kingdom.



Then this message came to me from the LORD: “Son of man, make a map and trace two routes on it for the sword of Babylon’s king to follow. Put a signpost on the road that comes out of Babylon where the road forks into two—one road going to Ammon and its capital, Rabbah, and the other to Judah and fortified Jerusalem. The king of Babylon now stands at the fork, uncertain whether to attack Jerusalem or Rabbah. He calls his magicians to look for omens. They cast lots by shaking arrows from the quiver. They inspect the livers of animal sacrifices. The omen in his right hand says, ‘Jerusalem!’ With battering rams his soldiers will go against the gates, shouting for the kill. They will put up siege towers and build ramps against the walls. The people of Jerusalem will think it is a false omen, because of their treaty with the Babylonians. But the king of Babylon will remind the people of their rebellion. Then he will attack and capture them.

“Therefore, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: Again and again you remind me of your sin and your guilt. You don’t even try to hide it! In everything you do, your sins are obvious for all to see. So now the time of your punishment has come!

“O you corrupt and wicked prince of Israel, your final day of reckoning is here! This is what the Sovereign LORD says:

“Take off your jeweled crown,
for the old order changes.
Now the lowly will be exalted,
and the mighty will be brought down.
Destruction! Destruction!
I will surely destroy the kingdom.
And it will not be restored until the one appears
who has the right to judge it.
Then I will hand it over to him.” . . .

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Again a message came to me from the LORD: “Son of man, give the people of Israel this message: In the day of my indignation, you will be like a polluted land, a land without rain. Your princes plot conspiracies just as lions stalk their prey. They devour innocent people, seizing treasures and extorting wealth. They make many widows in the land. Your priests have violated my instructions and defiled my holy things. They make no distinction between what is holy and what is not. And they do not teach my people the difference between what is ceremonially clean and unclean. They disregard my Sabbath days so that I am dishonored among them. Your leaders are like wolves who tear apart their victims. They actually destroy people’s lives for money! And your prophets cover up for them by announcing false visions and making lying predictions. They say, ‘My message is from the Sovereign LORD,’ when the LORD hasn’t spoken a single word to them. Even common people oppress the poor, rob the needy, and deprive foreigners of justice.

“I looked for someone who might rebuild the wall of righteousness that guards the land. I searched for someone to stand in the gap in the wall so I wouldn’t have to destroy the land, but I found no one. So now I will pour out my fury on them, consuming them with the fire of my anger. I will heap on their heads the full penalty for all their sins. I, the Sovereign LORD, have spoken!”

—*from the prophet Ezekiel*

TALKING TOGETHER:

God is willing to wait a very long time for his plan to come to completion. Along the way, he keeps working with his people, despite all their

failures, disloyalty, and wrongdoing. They rightfully suffer the results of their failures, but notice that God leaves hints of a better story to come. The old order will end, and in the future the lowly and humble people will be lifted up. And as for their destroyed kingdom, a ruler will appear who is worthy of being king. When he comes, God will restore their kingdom. In the midst of pain, the hope for a new and very different future remains.

Notice that the hope God promised his people was for something beyond their own lifetimes. Their perspective was more about God’s big plans for Israel and for the world than about their individual lives. Why do you think we typically view things so differently? What difference does it make if we have short-term or long-term expectations?

DAY 31

Proud, Rich, and Going Down

(from *Prophets*, pages 360-362)

The ancient fortress city of Tyre, along with its sister city Sidon, was a key port city on the Mediterranean Sea just north of the land of Israel. The people of Tyre became very skilled in shipbuilding and sailing. As a key trading partner with many other nations around the Mediterranean, the city became very wealthy and prosperous. This wealth led to great pride, and the city became enthralled with its own splendor and glory.

To focus on one’s own greatness is a common temptation of the world’s great empires and something God repeatedly condemns in the Bible. Now it is Tyre’s turn to learn the lesson of the limits of its power.

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Then this message came to me from the LORD: “Son of man, give the prince of Tyre this message from the Sovereign LORD:

“In your great pride you claim, ‘I am a god!
I sit on a divine throne in the heart of the sea.’
But you are only a man and not a god,
though you boast that you are a god.
You regard yourself as wiser than Daniel
and think no secret is hidden from you.

With your wisdom and understanding you have amassed great wealth—
gold and silver for your treasuries.

Yes, your wisdom has made you very rich,
and your riches have made you very proud.

“Therefore, this is what the Sovereign LORD says:

Because you think you are as wise as a god,
I will now bring against you a foreign army,
the terror of the nations.

They will draw their swords against your marvelous wisdom
and defile your splendor!

They will bring you down to the pit,
and you will die in the heart of the sea,
pierced with many wounds.

Will you then boast, ‘I am a god!’
to those who kill you?

To them you will be no god
but merely a man!

You will die like an outcast
at the hands of foreigners.

I, the Sovereign LORD, have spoken!”

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Then this further message came to me from the LORD: “Son of man, sing this funeral song for the king of Tyre. Give him this message from the Sovereign LORD:

“You were the model of perfection,
full of wisdom and exquisite in beauty.

You were in Eden,
the garden of God.

Your clothing was adorned with every precious stone—
red carnelian, pale-green peridot, white
moonstone,

blue-green beryl, onyx, green jasper,
blue lapis lazuli, turquoise, and emerald—

all beautifully crafted for you
and set in the finest gold.

They were given to you
on the day you were created.

I ordained and anointed you
as the mighty angelic guardian.

You had access to the holy mountain of God
and walked among the stones of fire.

“You were blameless in all you did
from the day you were created
until the day evil was found in you.

Your rich commerce led you to violence,
and you sinned.

So I banished you in disgrace
from the mountain of God.

I expelled you, O mighty guardian,
from your place among the stones of fire.

Your heart was filled with pride
because of all your beauty.

Your wisdom was corrupted
by your love of splendor.

So I threw you to the ground
and exposed you to the curious gaze of kings.

You defiled your sanctuaries
with your many sins and your dishonest trade.

So I brought fire out from within you,
and it consumed you.

I reduced you to ashes on the ground
in the sight of all who were watching.

All who knew you are appalled at your fate.
You have come to a terrible end,
and you will exist no more.”

—*from the prophet Ezekiel*

TALKING TOGETHER:

Again and again in the Bible we see the world’s great nations and empires seeking to gain god-like power and glory. This is an extension of what humans have done ever since their first rebellion against God. But when humans get organized and do this on a large scale as a whole society, the consequences are much greater. Look at our world today, and consider the great powers and superpowers. How are they like the great nations and empires in the Bible? Do you think they are tempted to focus on their own power and glory?

DAY 32

The Bigger They Are, the Harder They Fall

(from *Prophets*, pages 367-368)

In the ancient world it was common to compare nations and kingdoms to a great and mighty tree. Kingdoms could be considered strong and deeply rooted, healthy and flourishing, and seen as providing shelter and life for many people. Along with this perception was the idea that such kingdoms were self-sufficient, without any need to recognize or respect God, the Creator of all things. So after giving Ezekiel a prophecy about Tyre, God then gave him one about the powerful nation of Egypt.



On June 21, during the eleventh year of King Jehoiachin's captivity, this message came to me from the LORD: "Son of man, give this message to Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and all his hordes:

"To whom would you compare your greatness?
 You are like mighty Assyria,
 which was once like a cedar of Lebanon,
 with beautiful branches that cast deep forest shade
 and with its top high among the clouds.
 Deep springs watered it
 and helped it to grow tall and luxuriant.
 The water flowed around it like a river,
 streaming to all the trees nearby.
 This great tree towered high,
 higher than all the other trees around it.
 It prospered and grew long thick branches
 because of all the water at its roots.
 The birds nested in its branches,
 and in its shade all the wild animals gave
 birth.
 All the great nations of the world
 lived in its shadow.

It was strong and beautiful,
 with wide-spreading branches,
 for its roots went deep
 into abundant water.
 No other cedar in the garden of God
 could rival it.
 No cypress had branches to equal it;
 no plane tree had boughs to compare.
 No tree in the garden of God
 came close to it in beauty.
 Because I made this tree so beautiful,
 and gave it such magnificent foliage,
 it was the envy of all the other trees of Eden,
 the garden of God.

"Therefore, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: Because Egypt became proud and arrogant, and because it set itself so high above the others, with its top reaching to the clouds, I will hand it over to a mighty nation that will destroy it as its wickedness deserves. I have already discarded it. A foreign army—the terror of the nations—has cut it down and left it fallen on the ground. Its branches are scattered across the mountains and valleys and ravines of the land. All those who lived in its shadow have gone away and left it lying there.

"The birds roost on its fallen trunk,
 and the wild animals lie among its branches.
 Let the tree of no other nation
 proudly exult in its own prosperity,
 though it be higher than the clouds
 and it be watered from the depths.
 For all are doomed to die,
 to go down to the depths of the earth.
 They will land in the pit
 along with everyone else on earth.

"This is what the Sovereign LORD says: When Assyria went down to the grave, I made the deep springs mourn. I stopped its rivers and dried up its abundant water. I clothed Lebanon in black and caused the trees of the field to wilt. I made the nations shake with fear at the sound of its fall, for I sent it down to the grave with all the others who descend to the pit. And all the other proud trees of Eden, the most beautiful and the best of Lebanon, the ones whose roots went deep into the water, took comfort to find it there with them in the depths of the earth. Its allies, too, were all

destroyed and had passed away. They had gone down to the grave—all those nations that had lived in its shade.

“O Egypt, to which of the trees of Eden will you compare your strength and glory? You, too, will be brought down to the depths with all these other nations. You will lie there among the outcasts who have died by the sword. This will be the fate of Pharaoh and all his hordes. I, the Sovereign LORD, have spoken!”

—*from the prophet Ezekiel*

TALKING TOGETHER:

One of the things that empires and great nations fall into thinking is that they will always be around. They believe they will remain powerful and will always be able to dominate others and control their own destiny. And these empires did indeed have their moment in history. Some existed for a long, long time. But none of them can exist forever. There is a Creator, and he alone is the eternal God. Only his Kingdom will last forever. This is the only future the world has. In light of this, who should be given your highest allegiance and loyalty? Where should you look for your greatest security and hope?

DAY 33

The Failure of Leaders

(from *Prophets*, pages 373-374)

Those who are chosen or who presume to lead others carry a special responsibility. They have direct influence on the well-being of other people. Leaders are responsible for teaching, guiding, directing, and helping others thrive and find their own proper place in God’s world. So when leaders fail—when they think only of themselves—the consequences are especially high. The LORD gave Ezekiel a special prophecy just for Israel’s leaders—those who should have guided the people into faithfully keeping their covenant with God.



Then this message came to me from the LORD: “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds, the leaders of Israel. Give them this message from

the Sovereign LORD: What sorrow awaits you shepherds who feed yourselves instead of your flocks. Shouldn’t shepherds feed their sheep? You drink the milk, wear the wool, and butcher the best animals, but you let your flocks starve. You have not taken care of the weak. You have not tended the sick or bound up the injured. You have not gone looking for those who have wandered away and are lost. Instead, you have ruled them with harshness and cruelty. So my sheep have been scattered without a shepherd, and they are easy prey for any wild animal. They have wandered through all the mountains and all the hills, across the face of the earth, yet no one has gone to search for them.

“Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: As surely as I live, says the Sovereign LORD, you abandoned my flock and left them to be attacked by every wild animal. And though you were my shepherds, you didn’t search for my sheep when they were lost. You took care of yourselves and left the sheep to starve. Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD. This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I now consider these shepherds my enemies, and I will hold them responsible for what has happened to my flock. I will take away their right to feed the flock, and I will stop them from feeding themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths; the sheep will no longer be their prey.

“For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search and find my sheep. I will be like a shepherd looking for his scattered flock. I will find my sheep and rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on that dark and cloudy day. I will bring them back home to their own land of Israel from among the peoples and nations. I will feed them on the mountains of Israel and by the rivers and in all the places where people live. Yes, I will give them good pastureland on the high hills of Israel. There they will lie down in pleasant places and feed in the lush pastures of the hills. I myself will tend my sheep and give them a place to lie down in peace, says the Sovereign LORD. I will search for my lost ones who strayed away, and I will bring them safely home again. I will bandage the injured and strengthen the weak. But I will destroy those who are fat and powerful. I will feed them, yes—feed them justice!

“And as for you, my flock, this is what the Sovereign LORD says to his people: I will judge between one animal of the flock and another, separating the sheep from the goats. Isn’t it enough for you to keep the best of the pastures for yourselves? Must you also trample down the rest? Isn’t it enough for you to drink clear water for yourselves? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet? Why must my flock eat what you have trampled down and drink water you have fouled?

“Therefore, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will surely judge between the fat sheep and the scrawny sheep. For you fat sheep pushed and

butted and crowded my sick and hungry flock until you scattered them to distant lands. So I will rescue my flock, and they will no longer be abused. I will judge between one animal of the flock and another. And I will set over them one shepherd, my servant David. He will feed them and be a shepherd to them. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David will be a prince among my people. I, the LORD, have spoken!

“I will make a covenant of peace with my people and drive away the dangerous animals from the land. Then they will be able to camp safely in the wildest places and sleep in the woods without fear. I will bless my people and their homes around my holy hill. And in the proper season I will send the showers they need. There will be showers of blessing. The orchards and fields of my people will yield bumper crops, and everyone will live in safety. When I have broken their chains of slavery and rescued them from those who enslaved them, then they will know that I am the LORD. They will no longer be prey for other nations, and wild animals will no longer devour them. They will live in safety, and no one will frighten them.

“And I will make their land famous for its crops, so my people will never again suffer from famines or the insults of foreign nations. In this way, they will know that I, the LORD their God, am with them. And they will know that they, the people of Israel, are my people, says the Sovereign LORD. You are my flock, the sheep of my pasture. You are my people, and I am your God. I, the Sovereign LORD, have spoken!”

—*from the prophet Ezekiel*

TALKING TOGETHER:

Having looked for good shepherds for his people and finding none, God decides that he will come down and lead his people himself. He will show us what it means to lead well, how to care for others, how to help people be safe and thrive. God will set a new prince over his people, someone from the family line of King David who is capable of being a good leader.

God’s mission is to have his people living in the land he’s given them and flourishing in every way. God has always fulfilled his mission in the world by working in and through human partners. He will continue to work through human leaders, but they must learn from God himself what good leadership looks like. Pray for your leaders today, all those who have authority in your life—parents, teachers, coaches, and pastors. Pray that they will learn from the Good Shepherd.

DAY 34

A New Temple, a New Hope

(from *Prophets*, pages 381-382, 385, 387)

The loss of God’s Temple in Jerusalem was the single greatest tragedy of the Babylonian invasion for God’s people in Judah. Remember that the Temple was God’s home among them, the sign that he really did live with them and was their God. The Temple was also the great symbol of God’s promise to save and restore the entire creation. Images and carvings from the natural world filled the Temple, so that when people entered, it was like walking back into the Garden of Eden. Ezekiel closes his book of prophecies with a long vision of a new Temple that God was promising. He goes into great detail about the description and measurements of this Temple. Despite the Exile, God has not given up on his people or his plans for them!



On April 28, during the twenty-fifth year of our captivity—fourteen years after the fall of Jerusalem—the LORD took hold of me. In a vision from God he took me to the land of Israel and set me down on a very high mountain. From there I could see toward the south what appeared to be a city. As he brought me nearer, I saw a man whose face shone like bronze standing beside a gateway entrance. He was holding in his hand a linen measuring cord and a measuring rod.

He said to me, “Son of man, watch and listen. Pay close attention to everything I show you. You have been brought here so I can show you many things. Then you will return to the people of Israel and tell them everything you have seen.” . . .

A large building stood on the west, facing the Temple courtyard. It was 122½ feet wide and 157½ feet long, and its walls were 8¾ feet thick. Then the man measured the Temple, and it was 175 feet long. The courtyard around the building, including its walls, was an additional 175 feet in length. The inner courtyard to the east of the Temple was also 175 feet wide. The building to the west, including its two walls, was also 175 feet wide.

The sanctuary, the inner room, and the entry room of the Temple were all paneled with wood, as were the frames of the recessed windows. The

inner walls of the Temple were paneled with wood above and below the windows. The space above the door leading into the inner room, and its walls inside and out, were also paneled. All the walls were decorated with carvings of cherubim, each with two faces, and there was a carving of a palm tree between each of the cherubim. One face—that of a man—looked toward the palm tree on one side. The other face—that of a young lion—looked toward the palm tree on the other side. The figures were carved all along the inside of the Temple, from the floor to the top of the walls, including the outer wall of the sanctuary. . . .

After this, the man brought me back around to the east gateway. Suddenly, the glory of the God of Israel appeared from the east. The sound of his coming was like the roar of rushing waters, and the whole landscape shone with his glory. This vision was just like the others I had seen, first by the Kebar River and then when he came to destroy Jerusalem. I fell face down on the ground. And the glory of the LORD came into the Temple through the east gateway.

Then the Spirit took me up and brought me into the inner courtyard, and the glory of the LORD filled the Temple. And I heard someone speaking to me from within the Temple, while the man who had been measuring stood beside me. The LORD said to me, “Son of man, this is the place of my throne and the place where I will rest my feet. I will live here forever among the people of Israel. They and their kings will not defile my holy name any longer by their adulterous worship of other gods or by honoring the relics of their kings who have died. They put their idol altars right next to mine with only a wall between them and me. They defiled my holy name by such detestable sin, so I consumed them in my anger. Now let them stop worshipping other gods and honoring the relics of their kings, and I will live among them forever.

“Son of man, describe to the people of Israel the Temple I have shown you, so they will be ashamed of all their sins. Let them study its plan, and they will be ashamed of what they have done. Describe to them all the specifications of the Temple—including its entrances and exits—and everything else about it. Tell them about its decrees and laws. Write down all these specifications and decrees as they watch so they will be sure to remember and follow them. And this is the basic law of the Temple: absolute holiness! The entire top of the mountain where the Temple is built is holy. Yes, this is the basic law of the Temple.

—*from the prophet Ezekiel*

TALKING TOGETHER:

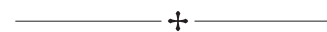
The LORD tells Ezekiel to be sure and give the people all the details he has seen about the coming Temple. For them, this would have been a profound promise: God was coming back to them, and their story would move forward! His Spirit would return and fill the entire Temple once again. They were still his chosen people, his instrument for bringing blessing to all the peoples of the world. Think about what it would have been like to be sitting in exile in Babylon after all that loss—of home, family, nation, etc. How would it have felt to hear this prophecy?

DAY 35

The River of the Water of Life

(from *Prophets*, pages 393-394, 396)

Ever since the rebellion of the humans at the beginning of the world's story, God's creation has not been everything he intended it to be. Brokenness, illness, and death have marked our journey in the world and interfered with God's desire for life. Ezekiel's prophecy of a new Temple gives us a vision for the future renewal of creation and the return of God's first intention. Life will triumph over death, and all that is broken will be healed.



In my vision, the man brought me back to the entrance of the Temple. There I saw a stream flowing east from beneath the door of the Temple and passing to the right of the altar on its south side. The man brought me outside the wall through the north gateway and led me around to the eastern entrance. There I could see the water flowing out through the south side of the east gateway.

Measuring as he went, he took me along the stream for 1,750 feet and then led me across. The water was up to my ankles. He measured off another 1,750 feet and led me across again. This time the water was up to my knees. After another 1,750 feet, it was up to my waist. Then he measured another 1,750 feet, and the river was too deep to walk across. It was deep enough to swim in, but too deep to walk through.

He asked me, “Have you been watching, son of man?” Then he led me

back along the riverbank. When I returned, I was surprised by the sight of many trees growing on both sides of the river. Then he said to me, “This river flows east through the desert into the valley of the Dead Sea. The waters of this stream will make the salty waters of the Dead Sea fresh and pure. There will be swarms of living things wherever the water of this river flows. Fish will abound in the Dead Sea, for its waters will become fresh. Life will flourish wherever this water flows. Fishermen will stand along the shores of the Dead Sea. All the way from En-gedi to En-eglaim, the shores will be covered with nets drying in the sun. Fish of every kind will fill the Dead Sea, just as they fill the Mediterranean. But the marshes and swamps will not be purified; they will still be salty. Fruit trees of all kinds will grow along both sides of the river. The leaves of these trees will never turn brown and fall, and there will always be fruit on their branches. There will be a new crop every month, for they are watered by the river flowing from the Temple. The fruit will be for food and the leaves for healing.”

This is what the Sovereign LORD says: “Divide the land in this way for the twelve tribes of Israel: The descendants of Joseph will be given two shares of land. Otherwise each tribe will receive an equal share. I took a solemn oath and swore that I would give this land to your ancestors, and it will now come to you as your possession.

“These are the boundaries of the land: The northern border will run from the Mediterranean toward Hethlon, then on through Lebo-hamath to Zedad; then it will run to Berothah and Sibraim, which are on the border between Damascus and Hamath, and finally to Hazer-hatticon, on the border of Hauran. So the northern border will run from the Mediterranean to Hazar-enan, on the border between Hamath to the north and Damascus to the south.

“The eastern border starts at a point between Hauran and Damascus and runs south along the Jordan River between Israel and Gilead, past the Dead Sea and as far south as Tamar. This will be the eastern border.

“The southern border will go west from Tamar to the waters of Meribah at Kadesh and then follow the course of the Brook of Egypt to the Mediterranean. This will be the southern border.

“On the west side, the Mediterranean itself will be your border from the southern border to the point where the northern border begins, opposite Lebo-hamath.

“Divide the land within these boundaries among the tribes of Israel. Distribute the land as an allotment for yourselves and for the foreigners who have joined you and are raising their families among you. They will be

like native-born Israelites to you and will receive an allotment among the tribes. These foreigners are to be given land within the territory of the tribe with whom they now live. I, the Sovereign LORD, have spoken! . . .

“The distance around the entire city will be 6 miles. And from that day the name of the city will be ‘The LORD Is There.’”

—*from the prophet Ezekiel*

TALKING TOGETHER:

Within Ezekiel’s vision of the healing of the world by the water that flows from God’s presence, we find an interesting note. All the foreigners that have joined Israel are to receive their own portion of land, just like any Israelite. This tells us that the vision of the renewal of life is really for all peoples and is meant to be global in scope. So Ezekiel closes with a picture of hope for the defeat of death, the restoration of life, and the return of God himself to live with his people in the home he gives them.

In the Gospel of John in the New Testament we will see Jesus refer to this very prophecy to describe his own work to fight against sin and death and to bring us back to the fullness of life. God keeps his promises through the work of Jesus the Messiah. This is how Abraham’s family brings blessing to the nations. Do you see how the earlier and later parts of the Bible work together to tell the whole story? Why is it important to read the entire Bible?

DAY 36

Be Strong! There Is New Work to Do

(from *Prophets*, pages 399-400)

Many of the final books of prophecy in the First Testament focus on the rebuilding of Israel’s Temple. Solomon’s first Temple had, of course, been destroyed by Babylon in the great invasion of Jerusalem. So when God’s people were allowed to return to their native land, one of their key priorities was supposed to be building a new home for God. But the people struggled to get this done. So beginning with the prophet Haggai, and then through others, God sends messages to his people to focus on this important work of rebuilding God’s Temple.

Why is the Temple so important? Because it is the symbol of the whole world and of God's desire to make his home with us here in his creation and for us to worship him properly.



On August 29 of the second year of King Darius's reign, the LORD gave a message through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Jeshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest.

"This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies says: The people are saying, 'The time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD.'"

Then the LORD sent this message through the prophet Haggai: "Why are you living in luxurious houses while my house lies in ruins? This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies says: Look at what's happening to you! You have planted much but harvest little. You eat but are not satisfied. You drink but are still thirsty. You put on clothes but cannot keep warm. Your wages disappear as though you were putting them in pockets filled with holes!

"This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies says: Look at what's happening to you! Now go up into the hills, bring down timber, and rebuild my house. Then I will take pleasure in it and be honored, says the LORD. You hoped for rich harvests, but they were poor. And when you brought your harvest home, I blew it away. Why? Because my house lies in ruins, says the LORD of Heaven's Armies, while all of you are busy building your own fine houses. It's because of you that the heavens withhold the dew and the earth produces no crops. I have called for a drought on your fields and hills—a drought to wither the grain and grapes and olive trees and all your other crops, a drought to starve you and your livestock and to ruin everything you have worked so hard to get."

Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the whole remnant of God's people began to obey the message from the LORD their God. When they heard the words of the prophet Haggai, whom the LORD their God had sent, the people feared the LORD. Then Haggai, the LORD's messenger, gave the people this message from the LORD: "I am with you, says the LORD!"

So the LORD sparked the enthusiasm of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the enthusiasm of Jeshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the enthusiasm of the whole remnant of God's people. They began to work on the house of their God, the LORD of Heaven's Armies, on September 21 of the second year of King Darius's reign.

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Then on October 17 of that same year, the LORD sent another message through the prophet Haggai. "Say this to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Jeshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of God's people there in the land: 'Does anyone remember this house—this Temple—in its former splendor? How, in comparison, does it look to you now? It must seem like nothing at all! But now the LORD says: Be strong, Zerubbabel. Be strong, Jeshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people still left in the land. And now get to work, for I am with you, says the LORD of Heaven's Armies. My Spirit remains among you, just as I promised when you came out of Egypt. So do not be afraid.'

"For this is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies says: In just a little while I will again shake the heavens and the earth, the oceans and the dry land. I will shake all the nations, and the treasures of all the nations will be brought to this Temple. I will fill this place with glory, says the LORD of Heaven's Armies. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the LORD of Heaven's Armies. The future glory of this Temple will be greater than its past glory, says the LORD of Heaven's Armies. And in this place I will bring peace. I, the LORD of Heaven's Armies, have spoken!"

—*from the prophet Haggai*

TALKING TOGETHER:

God is renewing Israel's story after a long, hard exile in Babylon. He is telling them to focus on rebuilding the Temple, but he is also giving them new promises and telling them he is with them. His Spirit is in their midst. And all his plans for Israel and the world have not changed. He will shake the nations—that is, he will judge and evaluate all peoples according to his justice. God's glory will return to the Temple, and with it, his peace. Have you ever had doubts about what God is doing in your life? Have you ever needed reassurance about his presence with you and his intentions for you?

DAY 37

Faithful City, Holy Mountain

(from *Prophets*, pages 406-407, 410-411)

The prophet Zechariah continues to prophesy about the need to finish the Temple of God. His writing is mostly a word of encouragement to the people to press on with their work and not get discouraged. In fact, the work on the Temple is closely tied to what God says he is going to do for his people and his land. His people will multiply, the rains will come, the crops will grow, and all will be well. So in light of this strong vision of hope, Zechariah tells the people of God to move forward and complete the work.



I saw a man with a measuring line in his hand. “Where are you going?” I asked.

He replied, “I am going to measure Jerusalem, to see how wide and how long it is.”

Then the angel who was with me went to meet a second angel who was coming toward him. The other angel said, “Hurry, and say to that young man, ‘Jerusalem will someday be so full of people and livestock that there won’t be room enough for everyone! Many will live outside the city walls. Then I, myself, will be a protective wall of fire around Jerusalem, says the LORD. And I will be the glory inside the city!’”

The LORD says, “Come away! Flee from Babylon in the land of the north, for I have scattered you to the four winds. Come away, people of Zion, you who are exiled in Babylon!”

After a period of glory, the LORD of Heaven’s Armies sent me against the nations who plundered you. For he said, “Anyone who harms you harms my most precious possession. I will raise my fist to crush them, and their own slaves will plunder them.” Then you will know that the LORD of Heaven’s Armies has sent me.

The LORD says, “Shout and rejoice, O beautiful Jerusalem, for I am coming to live among you. Many nations will join themselves to the LORD on that day, and they, too, will be my people. I will live among you, and you will know that the LORD of Heaven’s Armies sent me to you. The land of Judah will be the LORD’s special possession in the holy land, and he will

once again choose Jerusalem to be his own city. Be silent before the LORD, all humanity, for he is springing into action from his holy dwelling.” . . .



Then another message came to me from the LORD of Heaven’s Armies: “This is what the LORD of Heaven’s Armies says: My love for Mount Zion is passionate and strong; I am consumed with passion for Jerusalem!

“And now the LORD says: I am returning to Mount Zion, and I will live in Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the Faithful City; the mountain of the LORD of Heaven’s Armies will be called the Holy Mountain.

“This is what the LORD of Heaven’s Armies says: Once again old men and women will walk Jerusalem’s streets with their canes and will sit together in the city squares. And the streets of the city will be filled with boys and girls at play.

“This is what the LORD of Heaven’s Armies says: All this may seem impossible to you now, a small remnant of God’s people. But is it impossible for me? says the LORD of Heaven’s Armies.

“This is what the LORD of Heaven’s Armies says: You can be sure that I will rescue my people from the east and from the west. I will bring them home again to live safely in Jerusalem. They will be my people, and I will be faithful and just toward them as their God.

“This is what the LORD of Heaven’s Armies says: Be strong and finish the task! Ever since the laying of the foundation of the Temple of the LORD of Heaven’s Armies, you have heard what the prophets have been saying about completing the building. Before the work on the Temple began, there were no jobs and no money to hire people or animals. No traveler was safe from the enemy, for there were enemies on all sides. I had turned everyone against each other.

“But now I will not treat the remnant of my people as I treated them before, says the LORD of Heaven’s Armies. For I am planting seeds of peace and prosperity among you. The grapevines will be heavy with fruit. The earth will produce its crops, and the heavens will release the dew. Once more I will cause the remnant in Judah and Israel to inherit these blessings. Among the other nations, Judah and Israel became symbols of a cursed nation. But no longer! Now I will rescue you and make you both a symbol and a source of blessing. So don’t be afraid. Be strong, and get on with rebuilding the Temple!

—*from the prophet Zechariah*

TALKING TOGETHER:

Notice once more that in this vision God invites the other nations to join themselves to him as their God and their Lord. God will bless his people so that they can bring blessings to other people. God has chosen his people for the sake of the life of the world. This same purpose exists for his people today: the church of Jesus Christ. What kind of work do you think you might do someday for the sake of the life of the world? What could you do now? How is your church serving others and bringing them God's blessing?

DAY 38**That Great, Hard Day Is Coming**

(from *Prophets*, pages 423, 425-427)

As before the exile to Babylon, so now after the exile—God still expects his people to faithfully follow his ways. Israel's character remains the key issue, and God continues to urge his people to return to him with all their hearts. He tells them that he himself will return to them suddenly, and when he comes he will cleanse the people of Israel, purifying them by the fire of his judgment. Those who have loved the LORD will be proven right, and he will reward them. And before the LORD returns, he will first send his messenger to prepare the way.

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This is the message that the LORD gave to Israel through the prophet Malachi. . . .

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You have wearied the LORD with your words.

“How have we wearied him?” you ask.

You have wearied him by saying that all who do evil are good in the LORD's sight, and he is pleased with them. You have wearied him by asking, “Where is the God of justice?”

“Look! I am sending my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. Then the Lord you are seeking will suddenly come to his Temple. The

messenger of the covenant, whom you look for so eagerly, is surely coming,” says the LORD of Heaven's Armies.

“But who will be able to endure it when he comes? Who will be able to stand and face him when he appears? For he will be like a blazing fire that refines metal, or like a strong soap that bleaches clothes. He will sit like a refiner of silver, burning away the dross. He will purify the Levites, refining them like gold and silver, so that they may once again offer acceptable sacrifices to the LORD. Then once more the LORD will accept the offerings brought to him by the people of Judah and Jerusalem, as he did in the past.

“At that time I will put you on trial. I am eager to witness against all sorcerers and adulterers and liars. I will speak against those who cheat employees of their wages, who oppress widows and orphans, or who deprive the foreigners living among you of justice, for these people do not fear me,” says the LORD of Heaven's Armies. . . .

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Then those who feared the LORD spoke with each other, and the LORD listened to what they said. In his presence, a scroll of remembrance was written to record the names of those who feared him and always thought about the honor of his name.

“They will be my people,” says the LORD of Heaven's Armies. “On the day when I act in judgment, they will be my own special treasure. I will spare them as a father spares an obedient child. Then you will again see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.”

The LORD of Heaven's Armies says, “The day of judgment is coming, burning like a furnace. On that day the arrogant and the wicked will be burned up like straw. They will be consumed—roots, branches, and all.

“But for you who fear my name, the Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing in his wings. And you will go free, leaping with joy like calves let out to pasture. On the day when I act, you will tread upon the wicked as if they were dust under your feet,” says the LORD of Heaven's Armies.

“Remember to obey the Law of Moses, my servant—all the decrees and regulations that I gave him on Mount Sinai for all Israel.

“Look, I am sending you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the LORD arrives. His preaching will turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers. Otherwise I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

—*from the prophet Malachi*

TALKING TOGETHER:

The coming of the LORD will bring both judgment and healing. This is the consistent message of all of Israel's prophets. God's love requires both: judgment that clearly identifies and removes harmful wrongdoing and healing that restores and brings life. Are we open to both of these actions by God in our own lives?

DAY 39**Will He Bring Darkness or Light?**

(from *Prophets*, pages 432, 435-438)

It's hard to know exactly when the prophet Joel lived and prophesied because he doesn't tell us about himself and his writing is not tied to any specific historical setting or event. But the themes of this short book are consistent with the other prophets. There are warnings for God's people to turn, repent, and change their behavior. And there are words of comfort and coming joy. Joel uses strong, vivid images—smoke and fire, wine and feasts—to powerfully deliver his messages.



Dress yourselves in burlap and weep, you priests!
 Wail, you who serve before the altar!
 Come, spend the night in burlap,
 you ministers of my God.
 For there is no grain or wine
 to offer at the Temple of your God.
 Announce a time of fasting;
 call the people together for a solemn meeting.
 Bring the leaders
 and all the people of the land
 into the Temple of the LORD your God,
 and cry out to him there.
 The day of the LORD is near,
 the day when destruction comes from the Almighty.
 How terrible that day will be! . . .

The LORD says, "I will give you back what you lost
 to the swarming locusts, the hopping locusts,

the stripping locusts, and the cutting locusts.

It was I who sent this great destroying army against you.
 Once again you will have all the food you want,
 and you will praise the LORD your God,
 who does these miracles for you.

Never again will my people be disgraced.
 Then you will know that I am among my people Israel,
 that I am the LORD your God, and there is no other.
 Never again will my people be disgraced.

"Then, after doing all those things,
 I will pour out my Spirit upon all people.
 Your sons and daughters will prophesy.
 Your old men will dream dreams,
 and your young men will see visions.
 In those days I will pour out my Spirit
 even on servants—men and women alike.
 And I will cause wonders in the heavens and on the
 earth—
 blood and fire and columns of smoke.
 The sun will become dark,
 and the moon will turn blood red
 before that great and terrible day of the LORD arrives.
 But everyone who calls on the name of the LORD
 will be saved,
 for some on Mount Zion in Jerusalem will escape,
 just as the LORD has said.
 These will be among the survivors
 whom the LORD has called. . . .

And now, O LORD, call out your warriors!

"Let the nations be called to arms.
 Let them march to the valley of Jehoshaphat.
 There I, the LORD, will sit
 to pronounce judgment on them all.
 Swing the sickle,
 for the harvest is ripe.
 Come, tread the grapes,
 for the winepress is full.
 The storage vats are overflowing
 with the wickedness of these people."

Thousands upon thousands are waiting in the valley of decision.
 There the day of the LORD will soon arrive.
 The sun and moon will grow dark,
 and the stars will no longer shine.
 The LORD's voice will roar from Zion
 and thunder from Jerusalem,
 and the heavens and the earth will shake.
 But the LORD will be a refuge for his people,
 a strong fortress for the people of Israel.

“Then you will know that I, the LORD your God,
 live in Zion, my holy mountain.
 Jerusalem will be holy forever,
 and foreign armies will never conquer her again.
 In that day the mountains will drip with sweet wine,
 and the hills will flow with milk.
 Water will fill the streambeds of Judah,
 and a fountain will burst forth from the LORD's Temple,
 watering the arid valley of acacias.
 But Egypt will become a wasteland
 and Edom will become a wilderness,
 because they attacked the people of Judah
 and killed innocent people in their land.
 “But Judah will be filled with people forever,
 and Jerusalem will endure through all generations.
 I will pardon my people's crimes,
 which I have not yet pardoned;
 and I, the LORD, will make my home
 in Jerusalem with my people.”

—from the prophet Joel

TALKING TOGETHER:

Joel's urgent message to the people is filled with dramatic and expressive images. Prophets used images to get people's attention and strengthen their message. A lot of the images were symbolic. For instance, when Joel says, “mountains will drip with sweet wine,” it is not a literal statement but a figurative way of saying that the land will be blessed and the people will be prosperous. The events that are prophesied are filled with profound meaning for God's people, and the

symbols used by the prophets indicate to those people how important those events are.

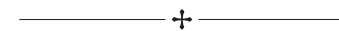
We are modern people, and we're used to precise and scientific language to describe things. But the Bible is an ancient book filled with ancient literature and Hebrew poetry. This kind of language is filled with metaphors, especially from the natural world, to help people feel the message, which has a more emotional impact. Talk together with your family about how reading poetry or listening to songs is different from reading something like the newspaper or an instruction manual.

DAY 40

A God Who Loves the Whole World

(from *Prophets*, pages 442-444)

Jonah was a prophet, but the book of Jonah is not a book of prophecy. Instead, it's a book about the prophet himself. With great literary skill it tells Jonah's story about being ordered to bring God's message to Nineveh, the capital of the powerful Assyrian Empire. God is going to destroy Nineveh because of its wickedness. But Jonah has a problem with the assignment and tries to run away from God. Why? Jonah is afraid that Israel's enemies, the Assyrians, will actually repent and that God won't punish them after all. As our story begins, Jonah tried to sail away in the opposite direction, but there is a storm at sea, and Jonah instructs the sailors to throw him overboard. Jonah is then swallowed by a great fish.



Then Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from inside the fish. He said,

“I cried out to the LORD in my great trouble,
 and he answered me.
 I called to you from the land of the dead,
 and LORD, you heard me!
 You threw me into the ocean depths,
 and I sank down to the heart of the sea.
 The mighty waters engulfed me;
 I was buried beneath your wild and stormy waves.
 Then I said, ‘O LORD, you have driven me from your presence.
 Yet I will look once more toward your holy Temple.’

“I sank beneath the waves,
 and the waters closed over me.
 Seaweed wrapped itself around my head.
 I sank down to the very roots of the mountains.
 I was imprisoned in the earth,
 whose gates lock shut forever.
 But you, O LORD my God,
 snatched me from the jaws of death!
 As my life was slipping away,
 I remembered the LORD.
 And my earnest prayer went out to you
 in your holy Temple.
 Those who worship false gods
 turn their backs on all God’s mercies.
 But I will offer sacrifices to you with songs of praise,
 and I will fulfill all my vows.
 For my salvation comes from the LORD alone.”
 Then the LORD ordered the fish to spit Jonah out onto the beach.

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Then the LORD spoke to Jonah a second time: “Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh, and deliver the message I have given you.”

This time Jonah obeyed the LORD’s command and went to Nineveh, a city so large that it took three days to see it all. On the day Jonah entered the city, he shouted to the crowds: “Forty days from now Nineveh will be destroyed!” The people of Nineveh believed God’s message, and from the greatest to the least, they declared a fast and put on burlap to show their sorrow.

When the king of Nineveh heard what Jonah was saying, he stepped down from his throne and took off his royal robes. He dressed himself in burlap and sat on a heap of ashes. Then the king and his nobles sent this decree throughout the city:

“No one, not even the animals from your herds and flocks, may eat
 or drink anything at all. People and animals alike must wear garments
 of mourning, and everyone must pray earnestly to God. They must
 turn from their evil ways and stop all their violence. Who can tell?
 Perhaps even yet God will change his mind and hold back his fierce
 anger from destroying us.”

When God saw what they had done and how they had put a stop to their evil ways, he changed his mind and did not carry out the destruction he had threatened.

This change of plans greatly upset Jonah, and he became very angry. So he complained to the LORD about it: “Didn’t I say before I left home that you would do this, LORD? That is why I ran away to Tarshish! I knew that you are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. You are eager to turn back from destroying people. Just kill me now, LORD! I’d rather be dead than alive if what I predicted will not happen.”

The LORD replied, “Is it right for you to be angry about this?”

Then Jonah went out to the east side of the city and made a shelter to sit under as he waited to see what would happen to the city. And the LORD God arranged for a leafy plant to grow there, and soon it spread its broad leaves over Jonah’s head, shading him from the sun. This eased his discomfort, and Jonah was very grateful for the plant.

But God also arranged for a worm! The next morning at dawn the worm ate through the stem of the plant so that it withered away. And as the sun grew hot, God arranged for a scorching east wind to blow on Jonah. The sun beat down on his head until he grew faint and wished to die. “Death is certainly better than living like this!” he exclaimed.

Then God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry because the plant died?”

“Yes,” Jonah retorted, “even angry enough to die!”

Then the LORD said, “You feel sorry about the plant, though you did nothing to put it there. It came quickly and died quickly. But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people living in spiritual darkness, not to mention all the animals. Shouldn’t I feel sorry for such a great city?”

—*from the prophet Jonah*

TALKING TOGETHER:

Jonah’s experience of leaving the land, being swallowed by the fish, and then returning seems to mirror Israel’s own experience of being exiled out of the land and then being allowed to return. Both Jonah and the returned exiles seem to face the same challenge: accepting that God loves all people, not just Israel. Is Jonah the only one God wants to save from chaos and destruction? Is Israel the only people God cares about?

Reading the book of Jonah at the end of the prophets prepares us for where the Bible’s story is going. We are moving toward the time of God’s larger vision to bring his salvation to everyone. Like Jonah, we, too, live in a big, wide world with lots of people who are very different from us. Does God love them? Do we?