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Different Ways of Looking at God

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WHAT'S IN YOUR TEACHING GUIDE

This Teaching Guide has three purposes:

- to give the teacher tools for focusing on the content of the session in the Study Guide.
- to give the teacher additional Bible background information.
- to give the teacher variety and choice in preparation.

The Teaching Guide includes two major components: Teacher Helps and Teacher Options.

Teacher Helps

Bible Background

The Study Guide is your main source of Bible study material. This section helps you more fully understand and interpret the Scripture text.



Teaching Outline

provides you with an outline of the main themes in the Study Guide.

Teacher Options

The next three sections provide a beginning, middle, and end for the session, with focus paragraphs in between.

Focus Paragraphs

printed in italics at the top of the page because they are the most important part of the Teaching Guide. These paragraphs will help you move your class from “what the text meant” to “what the text means.”

You Can Choose!

There is more material in each session than you can use, so choose the options from each section to tailor the session to the needs of your group.

Prepare Before the Session

Read the session for today in the Study Guide. Then read the options in this Teaching Guide, placing checkmarks beside the activities you plan to include. After you have decided which options to use, gather the appropriate materials.

1

ROCK: GOD AS REFUGE

Psalms 62:5-8; 144:1-4

Bible Background



Context: The Psalms

Both Psalm 62 and Psalm 144 can be read profitably in the context of the entire Psalter.

Many psalms refer to God as a rock or refuge. The psalms containing our focal passages are most meaningful when we read them in the context of the preceding psalms. Psalm 61 includes this prayer: “Lead me to the rock that is higher than I; for you are my refuge, a strong tower against the enemy” (vv. 2-3); Psalm 62 affirms the positive answer to that prayer with its opening words, “For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall never be shaken” (vv. 1-2).

Psalm 142 is a plea for God’s deliverance from one’s enemies. It includes the prayer, “Look on my right hand and see—there is no one who takes notice of me; no refuge remains to me; no one cares for me. I cry to you, O Lord; I say, ‘You are my refuge...’” (vv. 4-5b). Psalm 143 continues the plea for deliverance from enemies. Then Psalm 144 opens with the affirmation that God is indeed the rock who provides refuge to God’s people.

The Psalms often speak to the scenarios people of faith encounter today. We plead in faith for God to be our rock and refuge, and we affirm in faith that God *is* our rock and refuge.

Context: The Old Testament

Two of the greatest figures of the Hebrew Bible are credited with singing songs that emphasize the character of God as rock and refuge.

In Deuteronomy 32, Moses prays to God as “the Rock” (vv. 4, 15, 30-31). The emphasis of Moses’ prayer is on God being the perfect, just, and faithful rock who saved God’s people even though they were unfaithful. As we affirm and celebrate that God is our rock and refuge, it is worth pondering how we respond to God’s provision of strength and shelter. Do we take it for granted? Do we turn away from it? Do we give credit for it to ourselves or to others?

In 2 Samuel 22 (which is reproduced in Psalm 18), David sings a song “on the day when the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies, and from the hand of Saul” (2 Sam 22:1). This song affirms that “the LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge...” (vv. 2-3a). It asks, “For who is God, but the LORD? And who is a rock, except our God?” (v. 32). Then it concludes with exuberant praise: “The LORD lives! Blessed be my rock, and exalted be my God, the rock of my salvation...” (v. 47). David’s emphasis harmonizes well with that of our texts. All of these passages affirm that God is our rock and refuge in the face of adversity and opposition.

Outline

FOR TEACHING

Context: The New Testament

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus compares someone who hears and acts on his words to “a wise man who built his house on rock” (Mt 7:24). When we listen to and follow Jesus, we build our lives on the security that only Jesus can provide.

Other passages in the New Testament that use rock imagery to refer to Jesus include words of judgment or warning. In Romans 9:33 and 1 Peter 2:8, both of which quote Isaiah 8:14, Jesus is presented as a rock that causes people who do not believe to stumble.

Content: Psalm 62:5-8 & Psalm 144:1-4

Psalm 62 can be classified as an individual psalm of confidence (Anderson, 450). At the beginning of verses 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, and 9, the Hebrew particle *‘ak* is used. The NRSV translates this word “alone,” but it can also mean “truly,” which is likely the meaning here (Mays, 214). The psalm emphasizes that God is absolutely trustworthy.

Verses 5-6 are parallel to verses 1-2. The repetition identifies the assertions of these verses as the heart of the psalm. One difference between verses 1 and 5 is the substitution of “hope” for “salvation” in the second line. According to Claus Westermann, salvation has to do with past experiences, while hope looks to the future (154). Our lives, from beginning to end, rest on the security our unfailing God provides.

Between these parallel passages, verses 3-4 compare an opponent’s assault on the speaker to an attack on a “leaning wall, a tottering fence.” Compared to God, who is a rock, the psalmist sees himself as weak and frail. Verses 9-10 portray the opponents—indeed, all people—as being “but a breath” and “a delusion.” Thus the speaker “waits in silence” for God because “he alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken.” Human beings are ultimately insubstantial. God, however, is unfailingly solid and

- I. We can wait in peaceful assurance for God’s help in times of trouble (Ps 62:5-7).
 - A. We can trust God with everything about our future because our hope comes from God (v. 5).
 - B. We can trust God with everything about our lives because our salvation encompasses past, present, and future (v. 6; see also v. 1).
 - C. We can rest secure in the assurance of God’s help because only God is our true and solid rock (vv. 6-7).
 1. God is also our fortress (v. 6).
 2. God protects and secures our lives (v. 7).
- II. By recalling the truth that God is our rock and refuge, we can remind ourselves of God’s peaceful assurance (Ps 62:7).
- III. We should encourage each other to trust in the God who is our rock and refuge (Ps 62:8).
 - A. Sometimes such trust shows itself in quiet peace (v. 5).
 - B. Sometimes such trust shows itself in the pouring out of our hearts (v. 8).
- IV. God provides not only refuge but also help in confronting and overcoming struggles, suffering, and opposition (Ps 144:1-2).
- V. Compared to God, we are frail and fragile, but God nevertheless intervenes on our behalf (Ps 144:3-4).

strong. Of the line, “For God alone my soul waits in silence” (vv. 1, 5), James Luther Mays says,

The measures speak...of a quietness of soul, an inner stillness that comes

with yielding all fears and anxieties and insecurities to God in an act of trust. In Hebrew, verse 1 is a declaration, while verse 5 is a self-exhortation.... Something like “Truly, my soul is at rest in God; from him is my salvation.... Truly, O my soul, rest in God, for from him is my hope.” The variation speaks of a trust that is present now in the gift of salvation but must be maintained in life as the practice of hope. This stillness is like the peace of God which passes all understanding that will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil 4:7). (216)

Psalm 144 is a prayer for deliverance in time of war. Here, the “rock” imagery is more offensive than defensive. Indeed, the psalm asks that God intervene in battle and praises God for doing so. The imagery points to God as the one who overcomes as well as the one who shelters.

In Psalm 144:2, NRSV has “my rock,” echoing Psalm 18:2 and 2 Samuel 22:2, even though the Hebrew text reads “my steadfast love.” If we assume that the Hebrew reading is intentional, then it repeats an emphasis found at the end of Psalm 62, where we read, “power belongs to God, and steadfast love belongs to you, O LORD” (vv. 11-12). Knight says the psalmist could have been “obliquely suggesting that God’s steadfast love is as unchanging as a rock” (340).

A Way to Begin

We live in a time of rapid change. Our lives and our world seem to be in a constant state of flux. Moreover, because of advances in information technology, we know quickly about the changes that come about, regardless of where they happen. People with a maturing faith need to address the perils and tensions of life and also have a source of true security. We should deny neither the difficulties we face nor the real help that comes from God.

○ **Fears Then and Now**

Conduct an Internet search to discover what life was like in an earlier period of American history (for example, in the 1800s). Share your findings with the class. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- What might people in the past have feared?
- How are these fears similar to or different from what people fear today?
- How have threats and our responses to them changed or remained the same?
- How do the instabilities of the present compare to those of the past?

○ **How Stressed Are You?**



Distribute copies of the resource page “How Stressed Are You?” Have participants calculate their score by choosing items beneath each header and adding the numbers in parentheses. Explain that if their score totals 150 or more, they have a 50-50 chance of developing a stress-related illness. If their score totals 300 or more, they have a 90 percent chance of developing an illness. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- How much stress is caused by changes in your life circumstances?
- What sources of stability and strength do people seek in these times?
- How has turning to God in times of stress helped you?

B A Way to Explore Scripture

The psalms were written as the result of living encounters between God and God's people in the struggles of everyday life. In poetic language that touches our spirits, our texts offer images of God that promise the assurance of stability in the midst of the instability of life. Explore how these passages offer hope to anxious people.

○ Digging around for Rocks

Divide the class into two or three groups (depending on the size of the class). Assign each group one of the following passages: (1) Deuteronomy 32; (2) Psalm 62:5-8; Psalm 144:1-4; (3) 2 Samuel 22.

Have each group read their passage and record what it says about the image of God as rock and refuge. Discuss the following question.

Question

- How does God function as a rock and refuge in the lives of God's people?

○ A God We Can Trust

Read Psalms 62:5-8; 144:1-4. These psalms describe God as an unshakable rock and fortress, a refuge in whom we can put our trust. Compared to fleeting human existence, God is steady and enduring. Discuss how these images speak to those who feel tossed about by the ever-changing circumstances of life.

Questions

- When is God like a rock in our lives?
- What are the various ways God can serve as a refuge?

○ Lectio Divina

Lectio divina or "sacred reading" is a spiritual practice in which one reads a passage of Scripture over and over in order to invite the Spirit of God to speak through the passage. Today's texts lend themselves well to this approach. What follows is an abbreviated form of *lectio divina*.

Invite participants to follow along silently as a volunteer reads the assigned passages aloud in a slow, smooth fashion. Encourage participants to listen prayerfully and carefully to the words. Have them ask the Spirit to speak to them through the reading.

Invite the class to read along silently again as a second volunteer reads the passages aloud slowly and smoothly. Encourage them to focus especially on the "rock" and "refuge" images in the texts.

Question

- How can you relate to the testimony of God's trustworthiness in these verses?

C A Way to End

The Psalms are poetic and musical prayers, and we should try to hear them that way when possible. A closing worship experience that employs poetry or song as prayer can be an effective conclusion to this lesson.

○ **Sing a Song**

Provide hymnals for the class. Invite participants to search for hymns that describe God as a rock or fortress.

(Examples: “Christ the Solid Rock,” “Rock of Ages,” “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”)

Questions

- What hymns use the imagery of “rock” or “fortress” to describe God?
- What qualities of God do the hymn-writers praise with this imagery?
- How does this imagery speak to you?

Lead the class in singing one of the hymns. After singing, ask participants to pray silently, reflecting on how God has been and can be their rock and refuge when they are in trouble.

○ **Responsive Reading**

Print the words of both psalm passages on a single sheet of paper. Lead the class in reading the texts responsively (for example, one group can read the odd-numbered verses; a second group can read the even-numbered verses).

Ask participants to pray silently, reflecting on how God has been and can be their rock and refuge when they are in trouble.

Resources

George A. F. Knight, “Psalms, vol. 2,” *The Daily Study Bible Series* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983).

James Luther Mays, *Psalms, Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1994).

Claus Westermann, *The Living Psalms*, trans. J. R. Porter (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1989).

2

STORM:
GOD AS CHAOS*Psalm 29***Bible Background****Introduction**

Psalm 29 has been classified as a hymn of praise. There is an opening summons to praise (vv. 1-2), an enumeration of the reasons for praise (vv. 3-10), and a concluding invitation to praise (v. 11). Without doubt, the focus of the psalm is on the praise of Yahweh.

The psalm has also been classified as an enthronement psalm. Some scholars believe ancient Israel's New Year's festival included the symbolic re-enthronement of Yahweh as king. According to these scholars, this enthronement ceremony may have been the liturgical setting in which Psalm 29 was sung. In verse 10, the psalm clearly celebrates the kingship of Yahweh.

Furthermore, many scholars believe Psalm 29 may be an Israelite adaptation of an earlier Canaanite hymn that originally praised Baal, the god of thunder. Such scholars point to the predominance of storm imagery in the psalm. This imagery certainly implies such a possibility. In reflecting on this interpretation, readers might discuss how one religious tradition borrows from another. This would be an interesting discussion so soon after Christmas! Even so, we should not let speculation on the psalm's possible origins distract us from its clear function in the Old Testament

canon. Psalm 29 is clearly meant to offer praise to the one true God, Yahweh—regardless of any themes borrowed from another culture.

Worship in Heaven

The psalm does not picture God as a storm. It does, however, picture God's glory and power as being revealed in the elements of a storm. The psalm thus focuses on the revelation of God in creation and in nature. God's majesty can be seen in the natural forces that we experience on earth.

It is important to note that human beings are only mentioned in the last verse of the psalm. This detail has led many scholars to propose that the last verse was added to the psalm when it was adapted for use in Israel's worship.

The setting of the opening summons to praise is the heavenly throne room, and the ones being summoned to praise are the "heavenly beings" (literally "sons of God or gods" [*'elohim*]). We see other heavenly throne room scenes in Isaiah 6, Zechariah 3, and especially Job 1-2. In all of these scenes, the "heavenly beings" are also in attendance. In the supposed Canaanite source for this psalm, the "heavenly beings" would have been minor deities. In the biblical psalm, however, the reference is to heavenly or angelic attendants to Yahweh.

Outline

FOR TEACHING

Worship on Earth

The fact that Psalm 29 is included in the Psalter, which became Israel's "hymn book" during the post-exilic period, indicates that it was intended as a call to worship not merely for "heavenly beings" but for God's worshiping people. The heavenly worship serves to encourage our own acts of praise. As Walter Brueggemann has put it, here "we see the 'real worship' in which our human worship may derivatively participate and replicate" (142). Or, as James Luther Mays writes,

The opening call for the heavenly host to glorify the LORD is a liturgical way for the congregation to equate its own praise with what is right and required in the palace-temple. The congregation's doxologies correspond to the doxologies of heaven. (136)

As Mays also pointed out, virtually the same words used in verses 1-2 to summon the heavenly beings to worship God are used in Psalm 96:7-8 to summon the "families of the peoples" to worship God (136).

We also see this connection between heavenly worship and earthly worship in Revelation 5 where John envisions worship going on in heaven in which "the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints" (v. 8). Worship in heaven and worship on earth are connected.

Finding God in the Storm

The psalm uses the word "ascribe" three times and the phrase "voice of the Lord" seven times to drive its main point home: that God is worthy of glory and praise (Westermann, 232). Three times the "heavenly beings" are summoned to "ascribe" glory to God (vv. 1-2). Then seven times the psalmist depicts the "voice of the Lord" functioning in various ways that demonstrate God's glory and

- I. The heavenly beings are summoned to ascribe glory to the Lord (Ps 29:1-2).
- II. The voice of the Lord as revealed in the chaos of storms reveals the glory of the Lord (Ps 29:3-9).
- III. The Lord who comes in chaos has conquered and will conquer the chaos (Ps 29:10).
- IV. The Lord to whom glory is due and who acts in and overcomes the chaos is the Lord who gives strength and peace to God's people (Ps 29:11).

power (vv. 3-9). Those ways are associated with phenomena that accompany a powerful storm. Thus the psalmist underscores that we can see the power of God in the power of nature. As God's powerful voice is revealed through the forces of nature, we see why heavenly and earthly beings should ascribe glory to God

If God's voice is heard in thunder and other expressions of the storm, as the psalm expresses, then we might think metaphorically of God being as uncontrollable and unpredictable as a chaotic storm.

Nevertheless, much about Psalm 29 reminds us of Genesis 1, where the theme is not God *as* chaos but rather God overcoming, controlling, and bringing order to the chaos. For example, the sevenfold sounding of the voice of God in Psalm 29 calls to mind the seven words of creation God spoke in Genesis 1 (Knight, 142). Also, whereas in Genesis 1 the spirit of God hovers over the face of the deep and then the voice of God brings order to that watery chaos, in the psalm "the voice of the LORD is over the waters" (v. 3) and "the LORD sits enthroned over the flood" (v. 10). In verse 10 the word for "flood" is

the same as the word used to name Noah's flood (Anderson, 238), which can be seen as the return of the chaos God overcame in the creation. In effect, then, the psalm affirms through the use of storm imagery that God, even in God's wildness and uncontrollability, overcomes the chaos of creation. By extension, God also overcomes the chaos of our lives.

Finally, there is a thematic connection between Psalm 29 and the words of the angels proclaiming the good news of Jesus' birth to the shepherds in Luke 2:14. Psalm 29 begins with ascribing glory to God (vv. 1-2) and ends with a prayer for the blessing of peace upon God's people (v. 11). Likewise, the angels' proclamation to the shepherds also moves from "Glory to God in the highest heaven" to "on earth peace among those whom God favors" (Lk 2:14). As J. Clinton McCann comments, "By alluding to or at least by preserving the same movement as in Psalm 29 the Gospel writer makes a powerful theological affirmation. God is being enthroned in the birth of Jesus!" (164).

A Way to Begin

Most people like their lives to be predictable. We don't like it when problems and disruptions cause unease or discomfort. We certainly don't like it when threats or crises arise that genuinely threaten us. But chaos always lurks beneath the surface. Because of life's uncertainty and instability, we like and even need the stability of something unchangeable on which we can depend. People of faith depend on God in chaotic times. But what does it mean when we discover that God is also unpredictable and uncontrollable?

○ **The Money Drop**

Ask participants to take both a coin and a dollar bill out of their pocket or purse. Have them locate the words "In God we trust." Next, have them drop the coin to the floor and note how predictably it follows a straight line down. Now have them drop the paper bill to the floor and note how unpredictably it floats downward.

Questions

- If you were outside in the wind and you dropped some money, could you more easily follow and retrieve a coin or a paper bill?
- What do you think about trusting in a God who is not always predictable and easily apprehended?

In this lesson we will ponder how we can trust such a God.

○ **A God You Can't Control**

Explain that Psalm 29 describes God using the imagery of a storm. The danger and unpredictability of a violent storm suggests that there is something dangerous and unpredictable about God.

Questions

- Have you ever thought of God as dangerous or unpredictable? Explain.
- What biblical stories suggest that God does not always behave predictably?
- If God is unpredictable, is God also unreliable? Why or why not?

B A Way to Explore Scripture

The voice of God is not one-dimensional. Sometimes we experience God's voice as a gentle breeze. Sometimes, however, God speaks in the thundering, flashing, crashing voice from the whirlwind. Psalm 29 affirms that we can experience God's voice in the awe-inspiring power of chaotic events.

The psalm also affirms that even as God sometimes comes in the chaos, God ultimately works to overcome the chaos.

○ **When God Appears**



Distribute copies of the resource page "When God Appears." Read Psalm 29.

Compare and contrast the account of the appearance of God to Elijah in 1 Kings 19:11-13 with the account of God's appearance in Psalm 29. Discuss the questions provided.

○ **A Dark and Stormy God**

Read Psalm 29. Note other biblical passages with storm imagery. Invite volunteers to read these passages aloud: Exodus 19:19; Job 38:1; Psalms 50:3; 97:1-5; Nahum 1:3; and Zechariah 9:14.

Questions

- What aspects of God's character does Scripture compare to a raging storm?
- What makes this imagery effective?
- In what sense is God unpredictable? Where else in Scripture do we see God behaving unpredictably?
- Why might people perceive the unpredictability of God as a threat?
- In what sense is God dangerous?
- How does this dangerous aspect of God relate to God's holiness? How does it relate to the "fear of God"?
- Why do we resist the idea of a God who is described in the imagery of a storm?
- What are the dangers of associating God with a storm? For example, can you think of instances when God was viewed as responsible for causing storms that resulted in mass destruc-

tion? How do you reconcile a loving God with this image of God?

- How can biblical storm imagery refine or enhance our understanding of God?

○ **Remember Your Baptism**

Read Psalm 29. This psalm is traditionally read on the first Sunday after Epiphany. James Luther Mays writes, "The choice is a profound interpretation of the occasion. The liturgical setting connects the psalm's mighty theophany with the quiet epiphany in the waters of the Jordan" (138).

What about the day we commemorate the baptism of Christ? Consider how the life and ministry of Jesus, beginning with his baptism, might demonstrate God overcoming chaos. Consider the imagery of water in the psalm and in the accounts of Jesus' baptism. Consider also how your own baptism (or that of someone you know) is both an introduction of your life into chaos and an overcoming of the chaos.

Provide a large bowl of water into which class members can place their hands and remember their own baptism (or simply reflect on the meaning of baptism).

C A Way to End

Scripture can reflect the movement of our lives, offering a lens through which to view what is happening to us and to the people around us. How might Psalm 29 help us think about the life of discipleship, especially when God seems to come to us in chaos?

○ **Through Crucifixion to Resurrection**

Discuss how Psalm 29 can be related to the movement of Jesus and Jesus' followers through crucifixion to resurrection. Does the psalm's progression from God coming in the chaos to God overcoming the chaos have parallels in the experience of Jesus and his followers?

○ **The Wonder and Mystery of Worship**

End with a brief service of worship based on Psalm 29. Prepare a rough outline of the service before the session and provide hymnals and other resources for each participant. Components of this worship time might include the following:

- (1) A call to worship along with the heavenly hosts (vv. 1-2)
- (2) Pondering the ways God reveals God's self in Scripture, nature, history, and ultimately in Jesus Christ (vv. 3-9)
- (3) Reflection on how God is working toward the final defeat of chaos (vv. 10-11)

Conclude with prayer confessing our tendency to place God in a box and thanking God for refusing to be so controlled. Ask God to display divine power in overcoming the chaos of our lives.

Resources

A. A. Anderson, "Psalms 1-72," *The New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1972).

Walter Brueggemann, "The Message of the Psalms: a Theological Commentary," *Augsburg Old Testament Studies* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).

George A. F. Knight, "Psalms," vol. 1, *The Daily Study Bible Series* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982).

James Luther Mays, *Psalms, Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1994).

J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993).

Claus Westermann, *The Living Psalms*, trans. J. R. Porter (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1989).

3

FIRE:

GOD AS PURIFIER

*Malachi 2:17–3:4***Bible Background****Introduction**

The book of Malachi cannot be dated with accuracy, but many scholars propose it was written in the second half of the fifth century BC. The book records the words of a prophet who lived about 100 years after exiles in Babylon began to return to Judah. After the fall of Babylon to the Persians in 539 BC, the Persian king Cyrus issued an edict that allowed the Jews to return to their homeland to reestablish their nation, albeit under Persian rule (Ezr 1, 6).

We know nothing about the prophet Malachi. Indeed, we do not even know if Malachi was his name. The name means “my messenger.” This may have been a title or self-reference rather than a proper name.

The literary form of the book of Malachi is unusual. The biblical writer communicates his message in a dialogue or disputation style. Typically, Malachi makes a statement, usually some kind of accusation or challenge, that is followed by a question from the people. Then God responds, usually by leveling a charge against the hearers. For example, in Malachi 1:6 we read, “A son honors his father, and servants their master. If then I am a father, where is the honor due me? And if I am a master, where is the respect due me?’ says the LORD of hosts to you,

O priests, who despise my name.”

The priests then respond, “How have we despised your name?” to which God replies, “By offering polluted food on my altar” (1:7). Such a format is followed throughout the book.

This approach gives the book the feel of a legal proceeding, which is appropriate given that much of the prophecy focuses on bringing charges against the people.

The God of Justice Is Coming

Our passage begins with the prophet accusing the people of “wearying” God with their words. The people ask how they have done so, and the prophet answers, “By saying, ‘All who do evil are good in the sight of the LORD, and he delights in them.’ Or by asking, ‘Where is the God of justice?’” (2:17). Malachi 3:1-4 is a response to the people’s faithless comments.

Many commentators say the people’s comments deal with theodicy, or the issue of how one reconciles belief in a good and just God with the presence of evil and injustice in the world. Elizabeth Achtemeier, however, contends that questions of theodicy are usually posed by righteous sufferers. But the people Malachi addresses in this passage are not righteous sufferers. As Achtemeier puts it,

They are living disobedient lives,
and they do not think that matters

one way or another—because God is totally absent from the scene and does nothing! When they ask, “Where is the God of justice?” they are expressing their doubt that he is anywhere, that he even cares for them, or that he has anything whatsoever to do with their lives. (184)

Malachi 3:1-4 is God’s announcement that God does have something to do with their lives. To their statement that God delights in those who do evil, God says “No.” To their question, “Where is the God of justice?” God answers, “I am coming!” But before the Lord comes, the Lord’s messenger will come. This is an eschatological passage (Smith, 328). It looks forward to the Day of the Lord. In popular piety, the Day of the Lord was seen in terms of blessing. The prophets, however, tended to see it in terms of judgment. We can see this contrast in verses 1-2, where Malachi says, “The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure his coming, and who can stand when he appears?”

Such future-oriented passages always have their roots in present circumstances. The circumstances of Malachi’s day, which the prophet knew God would address, are important for understanding the prophet’s message. Verse 5 identifies several specific sins of Malachi’s day that the Lord will come to judge. Many of these sins are still prevalent in our time, including adultery, giving false testimony, and oppressing the weak and helpless.

A Refiner’s Fire

The prophet uses fire as an image of purification. He warns the people that God’s coming will be like fire. Fortunately, the prophet has in mind not a blazing wildfire or a devastating explosion but rather a refiner’s fire. God’s coming, he says, is like a refiner’s or smelter’s fire and fullers’ or launderers’ soap. God’s purpose is not to destroy but to purify,

Outline

FOR TEACHING

- I. The question of justice is posed (2:17).
- II. The messenger of preparation, the forerunner, is coming (3:1).
- III. The messenger of the covenant, the Lord, is coming (3:1-3).
 - A. The people expect pleasant blessings when the Lord comes (3:1).
 - B. The people receive difficult blessings when the Lord comes (3:2-3).
- IV. The coming Lord purifies the people (3:2-3).
- V. The result of the coming Lord’s purification is a people and a ministry better able to worship and serve the Lord (3:3-4).

so that their worship will once again please God.

This is not the only time in Scripture where God’s holy presence is compared to fire. Isaiah experienced God’s purification when an angel touched his tongue with a burning coal from the altar (Isa 6:6-7). Describing a time of future judgment, the author of Hebrews calls God “a consuming fire” (Heb 12:29).

As a blazing refiner’s fire, God eliminates the impurity of sin from the covenant people’s lives. This purifying process makes them more fit to be God’s people. To what “covenant” does Malachi refer in verse 1? It seems best to read the reference as a double one, since the two large sections preceding our passage deal with the priests’ violation of the “covenant with Levi” (1:6-2:9) and with the whole nation’s violation of God’s covenant with all the people (2:10-17), meaning the covenant of Sinai.

Malachi speaks of two messengers in verse 1. The first is the forerunner who will announce the Lord’s coming. While

this messenger is not identified in this passage, Malachi 4:5 does name Elijah as the forerunner of the “great and terrible day of the LORD.” The New Testament picks up on that identification by naming John the Baptizer as the “Elijah” who heralds the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. The second messenger, the “messenger of the covenant,” refers to the coming Lord himself.

The prophet compares God to a refiner’s fire, denoting the purifying rather than the destroying aspect of fire. This is good news! It means that God comes as fire not to destroy the people but to cleanse them. On the other hand, Malachi 4 does say that “the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble” and that the people of God “shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet” (4:1, 3).

The image of God as fire in Malachi offers a picture of both the purification of the righteous and the destruction of the unrighteous.

A *A Way to Begin*

Malachi’s audience, both the priests and the people, had to face the fact that their sins mattered to God and that God was prepared to take drastic measures to address their sins. God still cares about the state of our lives. Do we keep our minds and hearts open to what God has to say to us about our sin?

○ **A Sin Inventory**

Have participants read Malachi 3:5 and another Bible passage such as Romans 1:29-31 or Galatians 5:19-21. Ask them not merely to list the sins but to categorize them. For example, they might decide that some of these sins are “internal” and others are “external,” while other categories might be “personal,” “social,” “acknowledged,” “private,” etc. Lead them to reflect on the following questions.

Questions

- By your definition, what is a sin? What makes a certain behavior or thought a sin?
- By this definition, are there any sins in your life that you need to address before God?
- Why is it easier to discuss the sins of others, or of society as a whole, than to discuss our personal sins?
- How does our sin damage our relationships with God and others?
- What is God’s attitude toward our sin?

○ **Are You Listening?**

This passage mentions messengers who communicate the will and ways of God to God’s people. Ask participants to name some of the messengers God sends to us. What do these messengers communicate about God?

Invite your group to consider some of the other “messengers” they have heard who speak not for God but for cultural norms, greed, selfish ambition, and other factors.

Questions

- How can we discern between helpful and unhelpful messengers?
- Are we listening to helpful messengers enough? Are we listening to unhelpful messengers too much?
- What will helpful messengers tell us about our lives and about how God relates to us?

B A Way to Explore Scripture

*We must take seriously the attitudes and actions that harm our relationships with God and others. It is necessary to acknowledge where we fall short of God's ideals, but such acknowledgment is not enough. **God wants to do something about our sin, and God will.** As we open ourselves to God's purifying power, our lives will become more positive and productive, both as individuals and as a church.*

○ **The More Things Change the More They Stay the Same**

Read Malachi 2:17–3:4. Invite a volunteer to read Amos 5:18–24. Explain that Amos was written about 300 years before Malachi.

Discuss the similarities between the issues of Malachi's time and those of Amos's. Think especially of the relationship between ethics and worship—behavior outside the sanctuary and behavior within it. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- How are these issues different or similar in our time?
- Do we need from God today what the people needed from God in the times of Malachi and Amos? Explain.
- What are the implications for our worship if we do not accept the changes that God wants to bring about in our daily lives?

○ **A Refiner's Fire**

Brainstorm other Scripture passages that use fire imagery to describe God's presence (examples: the "tongues of fire" on the Day of Pentecost, the pillar of fire that led the Israelites in the wilderness, the fire on Mount Carmel that consumed Elijah's sacrifice, etc.). Are there common themes in these passages? Are there ways in which one passage or another seems to be unique?

Read Malachi 2:17–3:4. Discuss the symbolism of refinement through fire.

Questions

- What other images might Malachi have used to describe God's purifying presence?
- Why might he have chosen to use the language of fire?
- Does God's purifying work ever "burn" us? Explain.
- How should we respond to God's initiatives in removing sin from our lives?

○ **What Fire Does**

Compare the use of fire imagery in Malachi 3:1–4 and in Malachi 4:1–3.

Remind participants that this is symbolic language. Nevertheless, encourage them to ponder the truth that fire can be both a purifying and a destructive force. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- What does the fire imagery in these passages say about God's love and justice?
- How have we experienced that love and justice in our lives?

C A Way to End

God wants to remove certain attitudes and behaviors from our lives. We must be willing to let God work. How can we do this? **We must open up our lives to God's purifying power.** Challenge participants to embrace the changes God intends in their lives and in the life of the church.

○ **Taking God into Account**

In Malachi 2:17, the people's questions show that they do not believe that God cares about them or will do anything about the state of their lives. However, Malachi 3:1-4 shows that God does care and will do something.

Lead the class in silent prayer. Have participants reflect on how much they take God into account when they have to make moral decisions.

Question

- What changes need to take place in our lives if we truly take God into account?

○ **A Purifying Flame**

Light a candle in the center of the room with a fireproof container nearby (perhaps a small metal bucket). Explain that the flame of the candle represents the purifying fire of God.

Have participants write an attitude or action that they know God would like to remove from their lives. Invite them to ignite their papers and drop them into the container. As the papers burn, pray for participants to experience God's forgiving and purifying power in their lives.

○ **A Litany of Confession**



Distribute copies of the resource page "A Litany of Confession." Use this as a closing prayer at the end of the session.

Resources

Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Nahum-Malachi*, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox, 1986).

Ralph L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco TX: Word, 1984).

4

BEAST:
GOD AS AVENGER*Hosea 13:4-8***Bible Background****The Historical Context**

When studying the Scripture, it is helpful to take into account the historical and literary-theological contexts of a passage. This is especially important as we approach Hosea 13:4-8.

Let us begin with the historical context. Hosea is the only prophetic book that comes from a native of the northern kingdom of Israel who also prophesied primarily to that kingdom (Nelson, 392; Ward, 215). That makes Hosea's words concerning the situation of the northern kingdom especially intense and meaningful. He was one of them.

According to Hosea 1:1, Hosea functioned as a prophet "in the days of Kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah of Judah, and in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel." In Judah, the reign of Uzziah began in 783 BC and the reign of Hezekiah ended in 687—a span of nearly a hundred years. In Israel, the reign of Jeroboam II roughly coincided with that of Uzziah. The consensus among scholars is that Hosea's preaching ministry began during the latter years of Jeroboam II's reign and lasted until sometime late in Israel's history (Nelson, 392). The tremendous instability in Israel's kingship—six kings in the years between Jeroboam II's death in 746 and Israel's destruction in 722—may suggest that

Hosea regarded those kings as being too insignificant to mention. The stability and prosperity of Jeroboam II's reign gave way to chaos and collapse under his successors.

Perhaps most significant, Hosea ministered during the time when the Assyrian Empire, under their ambitious ruler Tiglath-Pileser III (745–727 BC), put immense pressure on Israel and its neighbors. In a few short years, the northern kingdom ceased to exist. In 722 the capital city, Samaria, fell to Sargon II, a successor of Tiglath-Pileser. Hosea had the foresight to see the disaster that was soon coming upon his homeland.

Having a grasp of this historical context helps us interpret our passage. The passage describes God as various wild animals: a lion, a leopard, and a bear (vv. 7-8). God threatens to destroy the people, but it is clear from other statements in Hosea 13 that the prophet thought the actual destruction would come at the hands of the Assyrian army. The words, "the east wind shall come, a blast from the LORD" (v. 15), should be seen as a reference to Assyria, as should the warning, "they shall fall by the sword" (v. 16).

Such an understanding does not necessarily help us reconcile the imagery of God as a fierce beast. At the same time, the passage is in line with additional places in the Old Testament where God is said to use other nations as the

instrument of judgment on Israel or Judah. For example, see Habakkuk 1:6-8, where God says, “I am rousing the Chaldeans” (v. 6). The Chaldeans are subsequently described with beast imagery (v. 8).

Hosea knew that God was going to judge Israel. He believed the instrument of that destruction would be the brutal armies of Assyria.

The Literary-Theological Context

The book of Hosea offers a theological interpretation of Israel’s history that is communicated through its literary structure. James M. Ward (215–18) communicates this insight well in his commentary.

The opening chapters of Hosea (which are helpful to read as you prepare for this lesson) tell the story of Hosea. God commands the prophet to marry Gomer, a “wife of whoredom” (v. 2). Hosea gives symbolic names to the three children that are subsequently born to his wife. Some of the names (especially Lo-ruhamah, “not my people”) hint that Gomer has been unfaithful. This infidelity is eventually confirmed as Hosea reclaims and redeems Gomer for himself. Though not all interpreters agree, it seems best to understand all the references to Hosea’s wife in chapters 1–3 as speaking of the same woman. Hosea’s personal experience is a parable for God’s dealings with unfaithful Israel.

The parallels between Hosea and God and between Gomer and Israel are stated clearly in 2:8-15. The biblical writer makes the following points: (1) Israel did not give God credit for the good gifts the nation had received, (2) so God would take back those gifts and punish Israel, but finally (3) God would woo Israel and again bless them.

Chapter 11 also presents Hosea’s interpretation of Israel’s history. It begins with God saying, “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacri-

Outline

FOR TEACHING

- I. God’s Exclusive Claims upon God’s People (vv. 4-6)
 - A. In the Exodus
 - B. In the Wilderness
 - C. In the Land
- II. The Sins of the People (v. 6)
 - A. Self-satisfaction and Pride
 - B. Forgetfulness
- III. The Terrible Grace of God (vv. 7-8)
 - A. Judgment for God’s Sake
 - B. Judgment for the People’s Sake
 - C. Judgment for the Relationship’s Sake

ficing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols” (vv. 1-2). Because of Israel’s worship of false gods, the nation would face God’s judgment (vv. 5-7). But then we read, “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?” (v. 8).

Thus, in chapters 1–3 and chapter 11 we see a pattern in which God punishes Israel for its sins. But the story does not end there. In both passages, God’s punishment is a prelude to and a means of reclaiming and redeeming Israel.

The same pattern is evident in chapters 12–14. Following the violently destructive language of chapter 13, chapter 14 anticipates a future return of Israel to God. “I will heal their disloyalty,” God says, “I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them” (14:4).

Hosea 13:4-8, with its savage imagery of God’s destructive judgment, must be seen within the overall literary-theological context of Hosea. When we read the passage in light of others, we see that the prophet communicates God’s desire for the coming judgment to be *redemptive*.

Conclusion

When seen in the historical context of the book, Hosea 13:4-8 envisions the judgment God brings about through the Assyrians. Literarily and theologically, these verses present one part of an understanding of Israel's history—a part that the prophet does not see as God's last word.

In this context, the passage teaches that God gets angry over Israel's continuous violation of the covenant, particularly since their behavior indicates their lack of gratitude and understanding. At the same time, the passage teaches that the exercise of God's anger ultimately has a redemptive and restorative purpose.

A Way to Begin

Which is harder to think and talk about: a God who gets angry because of our sins or a God who does not? We certainly don't enjoy knowing a loved one is angry with us. On the other hand, how strong can a relationship be when the people in it don't care if it is harmed by their behavior? Isn't justified anger a sign of a healthy relationship? Maybe we don't grasp the commitment and grace of God until we come to terms with the anger of God. How do we handle biblical passages that describe God's anger?

○ **Living Between Two Extremes**

Barbara E. Reid notes that the Gospel of Matthew gives two images of God. An example for one image is found in the Sermon on the Mount where God is described “as boundlessly forgiving and gracious.” The other, which is mentioned in some of the parables, pictures “God as vindictive and punitive” (8).

Reid argues that it is harder for us to accept the forgiving and gracious image. She says, “It is so much easier to know how to relate to a God who exacts payment for sin and whose love must be earned” (8).

On the other hand, Randy Rowland writes, “God isn't mad anymore. Any anger God may have had toward the human race was deposited in the God-Man, Jesus, on a cross two thousand years ago” (94).

At one extreme, Reid says that people can relate better to an angry God; at the other extreme, Rowland says that we don't have to be concerned about the anger of God because of the cross of Christ. Ask the following questions.

Questions

- Is one observation—that of Reid or that of Rowland—more correct than the other?
- Is the truth found between the two extremes? Why or why not?

○ **A Divine Menagerie**

Hosea 13:4-8 pictures God as a leopard, a lion, and a bear who will punish the people. In the book of Revelation, Jesus is depicted as “the Lion of the tribe of Judah” who “has conquered” (Rev 5:5) and also as “a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered” (Rev 5:6).

Compare and contrast these animal images of the divine. What might these images say about how God deals with sin?

B A Way to Explore Scripture

The beast imagery Hosea uses to describe God reveals God's anger over Israel's continued violation of the covenant relationship. God did not and does not act in anger before exercising much patience. Moreover, God's judgment and desire for reconciliation go hand in hand. **Hosea's depiction of God, as hard as it may be to hear, is a necessary piece of a complete picture of who God is and how God works in relation to God's people.**

○ Hosea's Theology of History

Put the class into three groups. Assign each group one of the following passages to study: (1) Hosea 2:8-15, (2) Hosea 11:1-9, and (3) Hosea 13:4-8; 14:1-7.

Have participants look for clues of how Hosea views God's anger in the context of the prophet's view of Israel's history. When they have finished, ask the following questions.

Questions

- Why was God so angry?
- What does such anger say about the character or nature of God?

○ A Dramatic Tension in God?



Distribute copies of the resource page "A Dramatic Tension in God?" Give participants time to read

the quotation from Abraham Heschel, then ask the following questions.

Questions

- Do we see such a "dramatic tension in God" in Hosea? If so, how?
- Do Christians today do proper justice to this dramatic tension? Explain.
- How can Christians affirm the holiness and judgment of God without neglecting the biblical teaching about God's grace and forgiveness?

○ "He's Not Safe, But He's Good"

Refer to the passage from C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* quoted in the *Learner's Study Guide*. If some participants are familiar with the story, invite them to share what they remember about the character of Aslan.

Questions

- In terms of our understanding of God, what is the difference between being "safe" and being "good"?
- When has God seemed "unsafe" to you? What brought about this feeling?
- How can we affirm the goodness of God even when it is clear that God is not "safe"?

○ Mother Bear

Discuss the imagery of God as a "bear robbed of her cubs" (v. 8). What does this symbolism add to our understanding of God's anger?

C A Way to End

Anger is a fact of life—God’s life and ours. In healthy ways, we must incorporate what the Bible says about the anger of God into our thinking and our Christian living. Explore how believers can reflect the truth about God in our attitudes and in our behavior.

○ **God’s Anger, Our Anger**

Share the following quotation:

The wrath of the Old Testament God is of a piece with the resurrection of the New: It is the will and the power to change the normal or customary course of things. Furthermore, it is the source of, and in some cases the sanction for, our human power to do the same. (Keizer, 18)

Ask participants to reflect, either silently or verbally, on the following questions.

Questions

- Are there ways we can and should share in the anger of God? If so, how?
- What are the dangers if the answer is “yes”? What if it is “no”?

Lead the class to pray that they will be angered only by what angers God, and that they will channel their anger toward acts of compassion.

○ **An Exercise in Remembering**

According to Hosea, God was angry with the people of Israel because they had forgotten what God had done for them.

Provide paper and pens, and ask participants to make a list of what God has done for them individually, for their families, and for their church. Invite those who are willing to share some of what they have written.

Question

- How can we practice remembering?

Lead the class to pray for grace to remember God’s many blessings.

Resources

Garret Keizer, *The Enigma of Anger: Essays on a Sometimes Deadly Sin* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

Jimmie L. Nelson, “Hosea, Book of,” *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Watson E. Mills et al. (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1990).

Barbara E. Reid, “Which God Is with Us?” *Interpretation* (October 2010), cited in “Century Marks,” *Christian Century* (30 November 2010), 8.

Randy Rowland, *The Sins We Love: Embracing Brokenness, Hoping for Wholeness* (New York: Doubleday, 2000).

James M. Ward, *Thus Says the Lord: the Message of the Prophets* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991).