



WILDWOOD CHRISTIAN CHURCH

DOOM & BLOOM

Fall '24

In the moments where it seems everything is doom,
God always brings the bloom!

SALVATION STORIES FROM THE OT

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ISAIAH 35:1 - 2

35 The desert and the parched land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.

Like the crocus, **it will burst into bloom**;
it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.

The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,
the splendor of Carmel and Sharon;

they will see the glory of the Lord,
the splendor of our God.

Reading Guide

Title: Ebenezer & Crocus

Theme: "Thus far the Lord has helped us."

Purpose: In our lives, we need to set up markers like Ebenezers to remind ourselves and others that God rescues and redeems us. These markers remind us over and over again that God takes our moments of doom and brings them to bloom.

Scripture:

1 Samuel 7:1-12

Isaiah 35:1-10

Jesus Story:

Mark 9:14-29

Additional Scripture Readings:

Isaiah 41:1-10

Biography of Samuel

Samuel was a judge, prophet, and healer in the Old Testament. The story of his life is told in 1 and 2 Samuel. As we will read in the coming weeks he was miraculously born to Elkanah and Hannah after years of infertility. In keeping her promise to God, Hannah dedicated Samuel to the Lord's service in the Tabernacle at Shiloh. While serving in this role, Samuel had a divine encounter where he received his first prophetic revelation and became known as one of God's prophets. He primarily served in calling God's people back to covenant faithfulness during moral and religious decline. He performed many signs and wonders on behalf of God. He is also known as the king-maker who anointed both Saul and David as the first Kings of Israel. Samuel served as a spiritual leader for Israel during the governmental move from judges to kings. He lived around 1100 BC.

Background of Isaiah

The book of Isaiah is attributed to the writings and prophetic ministry of Isaiah who lived during the 8th century BC. He prophesied over Judah during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. The full work of Isaiah is often divided into three "books," which each speak to a different occasion. In book one (1-39) Isaiah reprimands Israel for their sinfulness including hypocrisy and neglecting justice. He predicts coming justice for their actions. In book two (40-55) Isaiah offers a message of hope and reconciliation to the Israelites who have been taken into Babylonian captivity. Finally, Isaiah offers both warnings and promises for Israel after the fall of the Assyrian empire in 538 BC in the third book (56-66). Overall, the Book of Isaiah is a critical text that provides insight into the spiritual, political, and social issues of its time, while also offering timeless messages of hope and redemption.

Discussion Guide

What is the significance of the Ebenezer in the life of both Samuel and the people of Israel? What does Ebenezer mean? Imagine you were an Israelite during this tumultuous, early period in history, what would it have been like for you emotionally and spiritually to routinely walk by that Ebenezer?

The prophet Isaiah offers a beautiful picture of abundant hope for the Israelites, what catches your attention in this passage? What imagery is specifically powerful to you?

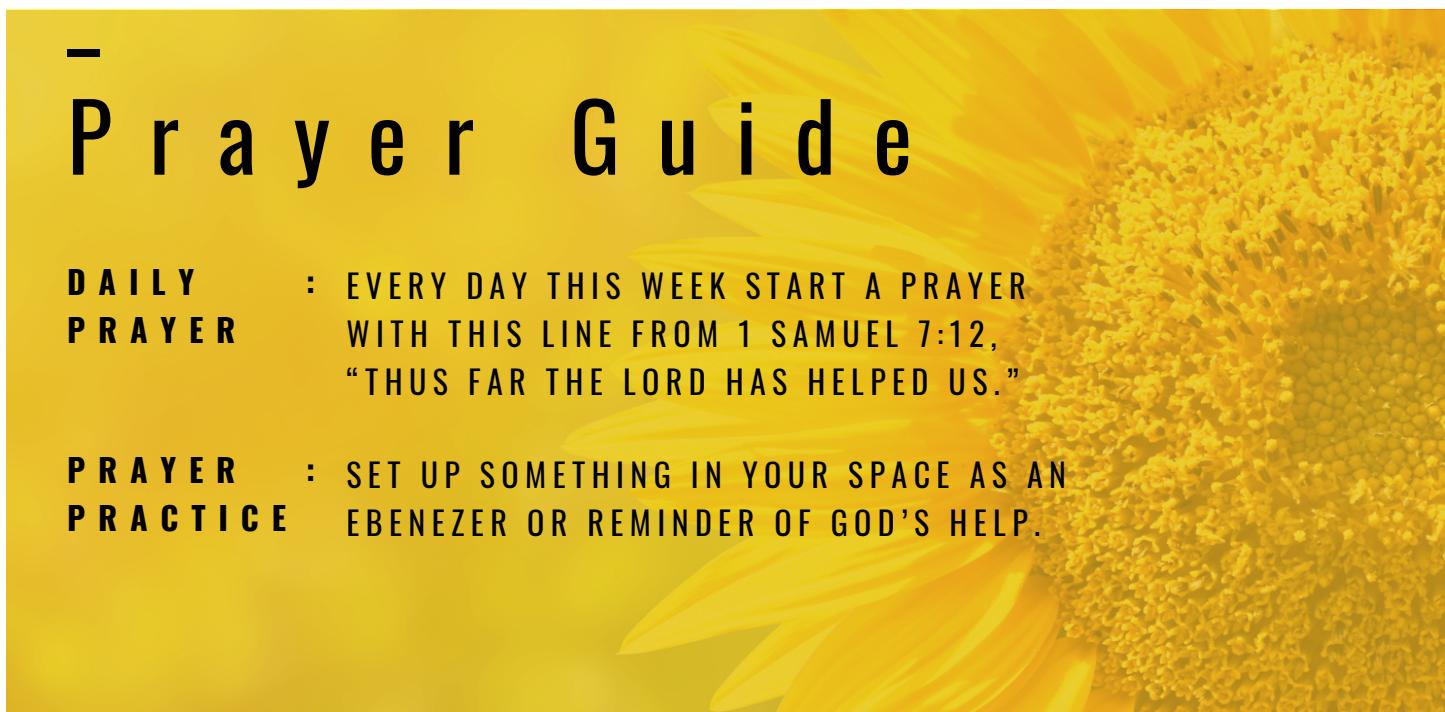
Though these passages are separated by nearly 400 years, in what ways do you find them related?

If you haven't already, read through the Jesus story for this week. This moment with Jesus takes place another 700+ years after Isaiah and 1100+ years after Samuel. Despite this time gap, how do you see Jesus' interaction with this man as reflecting both of these passages? What themes from Samuel and Isaiah, do you see when Jesus heals the young man?

Prayer Guide

DAILY PRAYER : EVERY DAY THIS WEEK START A PRAYER WITH THIS LINE FROM 1 SAMUEL 7:12, "THUS FAR THE LORD HAS HELPED US."

PRAYER PRACTICE : SET UP SOMETHING IN YOUR SPACE AS AN EBENEZER OR REMINDER OF GOD'S HELP.



Reading Guide

Title: Scarlet

Theme: "Show kindness to my family."

Purpose: Rahab doesn't belong to the covenant people, yet even at this point in Israelite history, God redeems her family by honoring her kindness. Kindness comes from our reciprocal relationship with God and others.

Scripture:

Joshua 2

Joshua 6:17-25

Jesus Story:

Luke 7:36-50

Additional Scripture Readings:

Psalm 138

Ephesians 4:29-32

Biography of Rahab

Rahab is a fascinating figure in the Bible because of the number of times she is mentioned despite being a Canaanite woman living in Jericho who is described as a prostitute. Rahab is notable for her role in aiding the Israelite spies sent by Joshua to scout the city of Jericho before the Israelite conquest. She hid the spies in her home and helped them escape, in return for a promise that her family would be spared during the impending destruction of the city. Rahab's faith in the God of Israel is highlighted in Hebrews 11:31, where she is mentioned among the heroes of faith. James also points to her as righteous in James 2:25. She is amazingly included in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1:5, which underscores her significance in biblical history. Rahab's story is often seen as a testament to God's kindness and the inclusion of outsiders in His plan of salvation.

Background of Joshua

The book of Joshua is the sixth book in the Bible and begins the section known as "history." The book tells the story of how the Israelites, with the Lord's help, conquered the land of Canaan and entered the Promised Land after many years of waiting. The book details how the land was divided among the twelve tribes and offers moral guidance for living in the land. The book of Joshua is mostly narrative but also includes some poetry and discourse. It is divided into four main parts:

1. Crossing into the Land: 1:1-5:15
2. Taking the Land: 6:1-12:24
3. Dividing the Land: 13:1-21:45
4. Serving the Lord in the Land: 22:1-24:33

Discussion Guide

In what ways do we see God bringing Rahab from doom to bloom?

One of the ways that the church has interpreted Old Testament stories is by seeing the virtues that are honored by God in each person. Rahab is a prime example of this even though she is an outsider. What specific virtues do you notice in Rahab?

How do the forces opposing the Israelites feel about Yahweh? Why do they feel this way? What have the Israelites done to create this feeling in their opponents?

What is the significance of the Scarlet rope? What does the Scarlet rope remind you of?

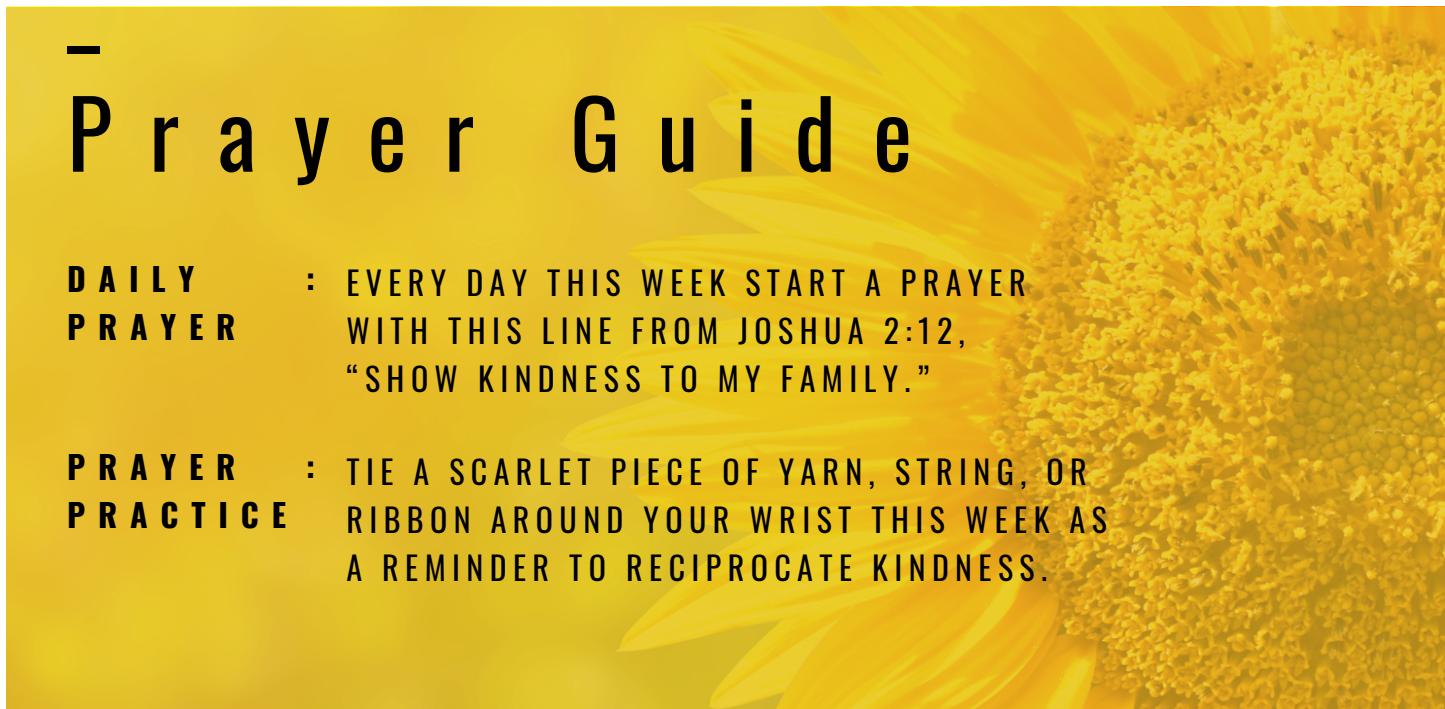
Read the Jesus story for this week. What relationship do you see between the sinful woman and Rahab? How does Jesus honor this woman and in what ways does this remind you of Rahab?

In this story, we see a reciprocity of kindness between Rahab, the spies, and God. Similarly, we see a reciprocity of kindness between the sinful woman and Jesus. In your life, when have you been a part of a reciprocity of kindness? How does this form of kindness help bring doom to bloom?

— Prayer Guide

DAILY PRAYER : EVERY DAY THIS WEEK START A PRAYER WITH THIS LINE FROM JOSHUA 2:12, "SHOW KINDNESS TO MY FAMILY."

PRAYER PRACTICE : TIE A SCARLET PIECE OF YARN, STRING, OR RIBBON AROUND YOUR WRIST THIS WEEK AS A REMINDER TO RECIPROCE KINDNESS.



Reading Guide

Title: Elk and Hannah

Theme: "The Lord remembered her."

Purpose: The story of Elk and Hannah teaches us that doom and bloom often involves sacrifice and coming to the end of one's self. Despite how it can feel, God always remembers us."

Scripture:

1 Samuel 1:1-2:11

Jesus Story:

Luke 2:41-52

Additional Scripture Readings:

Psalm 25:1-7

Habakkuk 3:1-3

1 Thessalonians 1:3

Biography of Hannah

Hannah's name means "grace" or "favor" in Hebrew. Hannah appears in the opening of 1 Samuel as the mother of the prophet Samuel and one of Elkanah's wives. Hannah's name is fitting for her role in the Bible because she is said to have received grace and favor from God. For years Hannah struggled with infertility and despite the love of her husband, Elk, she continued in despair until one day she poured her heart out to God at the temple and offered to God her firstborn. The prophet Eli gave a blessing over her request when he finally recognized her despair. God saw Hannah and blessed her commitment and desperation by giving her a son. Hannah waited till the boy was weaned then left him to spend his life serving in the temple. In 1 Samuel 2, Hannah sings a song of joy and deliverance, expressing her gratitude to God for his help.

Infertility in the Bible

It is surprising for most people to discover that infertility is a common theme across the Old Testament especially in the covenant lineage established between God and Abraham. Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, Rachel, Hannah, and Elizabeth all struggle with infertility in Scripture. There is a sense in which from the human perspective fertility seems to signify a blessing from God while infertility signifies being forgotten. Yet, time and time again through Scripture we see that from the divine perspective, God is always blessing, growing, and remembering all of these women both in their infertility and childbearing. Each of these women displays varying responses to their infertility. Sarah, for instance, shows anger, distrust, and, even, disrespect toward God. In contrast, Elizabeth shows trust and patience. There are few themes in scripture that better display how God can take the seeming areas of barrenness and bloom them into abundance.

Discussion Guide

How would you describe the relationship between Elkanah and Hannah in the beginning of this story? How does Elk (that's my nickname for him) display the character and presence of God throughout this passage?

What catches your attention about Hannah's vow to the Lord? Have you ever bargained with the Lord like Hannah?

As you read through Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2:1-11, what stands out to you and catches your attention? Why?

Read the Jesus story for this week. In what ways does Mary, mother of Jesus, remind you of Hannah? In what ways are they different?

Studies vary, but around 15% of married adults struggle with infertility, yet it is not something that is often talked about in churches. Why do you think this is? How should we talk about infertility in our churches? In what ways do we need to be especially careful?

When is a time in your life when you have felt like God has forgotten you? When in your life is a time where you know God remembered you?

Prayer Guide

DAILY PRAYER : EVERY DAY THIS WEEK START A PRAYER FOR SOMEONE WITH THIS LINE FROM 1 SAMUEL 1:11, "LORD ALMIGHTY, IF YOU WILL ONLY LOOK ON YOUR SERVANT'S MISERY AND REMEMBER..."

PRAYER PRACTICE : PRAY EVERY DAY SPECIFICALLY FOR SOMEONE YOU KNOW STRUGGLING WITH INFERTILITY

Reading Guide

Title: Ruth

Theme: "Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a guardian-redeemer."

Purpose: God is always our ultimate guardian-redeemer, but at times we must realize he loves to do this saving activity through the service of other people.

Scripture:

Ruth 1-4

Jesus Story:

Mark 2:1-12

Additional Scripture Readings:

Leviticus 25:8-55

Proverbs 23:10-11

Psalm 107:1-3

Biography of Ruth

The book of Ruth which was most likely written in the 5th century BC tells the ancient story of Ruth, the daughter-in-law of Naomi who stays with her mother-in-law after the death of Naomi's husband and sons. Famously Ruth promises Naomi, "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). Naomi is forced to return to her homeland, where Ruth gleans the fields to keep the pair alive. While she is gleaning, a man named Boaz sees her and blesses her for being faithful to Naomi. Ruth soon discovers that Boaz is Naomi's guardian-redeemer, a legal position under the Mosaic Law responsible for redeeming the life of a relative. Ruth eventually marries Boaz and blesses Naomi, "Praise be to the LORD, who has not left you without a guardian-redeemer."

The Guardian Redeemer

In the Old Testament, a guardian-redeemer (Hb. *ga'al*), is a wealthy relative who helps a needy family member. The root of the term simply means "to redeem" but in oriental usage included the concept of kingship. The term comes from Leviticus 25 of the Mosaic Law where the *ga'al* is responsible for redeeming the property of a family who falls into poverty, redeeming a relative who has sold themselves into slavery, avenging justice for a murdered relative, and redeeming the lineage of a deceased brother through the taking of his widow as a wife. In the Mosaic law, many parties are allowed to serve as the *ga'al*. Still, ultimately in the Bible, it is always God who is the supreme guardian-redeemer working behind the scenes as our father and brother (in Christ) to protect our inheritance and redeem it for us despite what season of harm might have found us.

Discussion Guide

In what ways do you see God's reflection of virtue in each of the three main characters of the book of Ruth: Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz?

What stands out to you from this story of Ruth? Why do you think it was so often retold in Israelite history and included as Scripture?

Read your Jesus story for this week. How does the story of Ruth echo through the story of the lame man's healing? What common themes or concepts do you see?

Ruth gives praise to God over *Naomi* because of the *redemption brought through Boaz*. So often God brings about our stories of redemption through the work of his people. As you reflect upon your life, when has God redeemed you for the blessing or through the work of another person?

— Prayer Guide

DAILY PRAYER : EVERY DAY THIS WEEK START A PRAYER WITH THIS LINE FROM RUTH 2:12,
"PRAISE BE TO THE LORD, WHO THIS DAY HAS NOT LEFT [ME] WITHOUT A GUARDIAN-REDEEMER."

PRAYER PRACTICE : WRITE A NOTE OF GRATITUDE TO SOMEONE WHO HAS HELPED REDEEM YOU IN YOUR LIFE EVEN IF IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME.

Reading Guide

Title: A Bowlful of Water

Theme: "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior."

Purpose: It is hard at times to trust that God wants us to fight, in his way, for Him. Yet, just as God chooses the lowly, doubtful Gideon, he still chooses us today as his mighty, and peaceful, warriors.

Scripture:

Judges 6-7

Jesus Story:

Matthew 4:1-11

Additional Scripture Readings:

Ecclesiastes 7:15-29

Acts 5:1-11

Biography of Gideon

Gideon is known as the greatest of the judges of Israel. The judges were the primary leadership in Israel before the establishment of the kings. They ruled over Israel as a leader selected by YHWH but without the political and social clout of a king. Gideon was a judge around the 12th century BC when Israel was still mostly a collection of small villages vastly outnumbered and outpowered by various other ethnic groups such as the Midianites. Gideon is known as the greatest judge despite being the most timid and testing God on three separate occasions. He came from the smallest of the twelve tribes, Mannassah, and was hesitant to serve from his first call. Regardless of his hesitancy, he was greatly loved by his armies whose rally cry, "For the Lord and for Gideon," reflected trust in their apprehensive leader. Despite being outnumbered, they easily defeated the Midianites.

Testing God

The Bible suggests that there are both acceptable and unacceptable ways to test God. According to Scripture, testing God can mean asking God to prove his trustworthiness. For example, in Malachi 3:10, God tells his people to test him by bringing full tithes and offerings to show that he will faithfully pour out his blessing. However, the Bible also suggests that there are unacceptable ways to test God. For example, in Deuteronomy 6:16, God commands Israel not to test him. Some say that testing God can be a pagan notion that shows a lack of trust in God and that instead, people should believe the scriptures God has provided. Others say that testing God is sinful when people demand that God "prove" himself because of a lack of trust. For example, Satan tempted Jesus to put God to the test by making a show for the crowds to prove that he was the Messiah, but Jesus knew that this would be an act of unbelief.

Discussion Guide

What was the major problem facing the Israelites in the opening story of Gideon? Why is this background information important for understanding the call of Gideon?

How does Gideon earn his nickname? How does this nickname foreshadow his future role for the Israelites?

How would you describe the relationship between Gideon and Yahweh?

God allows Gideon to test him. Why do you think he does this? Is there a time or place in our doom to bloom story where you think we should also test the Lord? Why or why not?

God chooses Gideon to fight for him, yet the way Gideon fights is vastly different from the way the rest of the world fights. How does God today still want us to fight for him? How is this different from the way the rest of the world fights?

Read the Jesus story for this week. Jesus faces the testing as God's chosen Son from Satan himself. How does Jesus response to Satan's testing give us insight and wisdom for the testing of our lives and our own testing of God?

Prayer Guide

DAILY PRAYER : EVERY DAY THIS WEEK START A PRAYER WITH THIS LINE FROM JUDGES 6:12,
"THE LORD IS WITH ME, HIS MIGHTY WARRIOR."

PRAYER PRACTICE : PUT A COTTON BALL IN YOUR POCKET THIS WEEK. BRING IT WITH YOU EVERY DAY AND BE REMINDED THAT JESUS IS YOUR ULTIMATE MIGHTY WARRIOR.

Reading Guide

Title: The Israelites

Theme: "When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land he has given you."

Purpose: It seems we are often most apt to slide away from faithfulness to God during our times of abundance. The story of the Israelites reminds us to praise the Lord in times of prosperity.

Scripture:

Deuteronomy 8:1-18

Jesus Story:

Luke 19:1-10

Additional Scripture Readings:

Psalm 22

History of Israel

Though the nation of Israel is predicted in the promise to Abraham, Israel is born through the Exodus when God calls the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery. The great prophet Moses is sent to save the Israelites and lead them to the promised land. During their wandering they receive the covenant as laid out in Exodus 21-24 & 31-35. Moses' protege, Joshua, is chosen to lead the Israelites into the land where they slowly root out other nations and claim the land for themselves through a series of battles described in Joshua and Judges. Though many specific individuals play important roles in the taking of the land, the entire narrative centers around YHWH and his relationship with the entire nation of Israel. Israel continually falls away from faithfulness to God in their abundance and eventually finds themselves desolate until they return through prophetic admonition.

The Food of the Land

An important but overlooked moment happens to Israel in Joshua 5:10-12, "On the evening of the fourteenth day of the month, while camped at Gilgal... the Israelites celebrated the Passover. The day after the Passover, that very day, they ate some of the produce of the land: unleavened bread and roasted grain. The manna stopped the day after they ate this food from the land; there was no longer any manna for the Israelites, but that year they ate the produce of Canaan." This marks the moment when Israel stops being dependent upon daily food from God and is now abundantly fed from the land that God promised them. In one sense they are now self-sufficient, but in the larger scheme, they are always dependent on YHWH as he promised. The food of the promised land was part of that promise. In Exodus 3:17 the land is described as "flowing with milk and honey." Similarly, when the spies return they bring massive clusters of grapes and again describe the land as "flowing with milk and honey" (Numbers 13:27).

Discussion Guide

Deuteronomy is the book of the law for the Israelites when they have taken the promised land. How does the giving of the law to the people serve as the background for this entire chapter?

Why does God call on his people to remember so often in scripture? What is it about our nature that is so inclined to forget?

Read the Jesus story for this week. What connections do you see between the God's encouragement for the Israelites in Deuteronomy 8 and Jesus' interaction with Zaccheus? In what ways might Zaccheus see the fulfillment of Deuteronomy 8?

Why do you think it is so hard to stay faithful to God during the times of abundance (bloom) in our lives? What is it about prosperity that can lead us away from God?

Prayer Guide

DAILY PRAYER : EVERY DAY THIS WEEK START A PRAYER WITH THIS LINE FROM DEUTERONOMY 8:10, "BECAUSE I HAVE EATEN AND AM SATISFIED, I PRAISE YOU LORD."

PRAYER PRACTICE : SHARE THE ABUNDANCE OF YOUR TABLE WITH SOMEONE ELSE THIS WEEK.

Reading Guide

Title: The Year of Jubilee

Theme: "Proclaim liberty throughout the land!"

Purpose: God loves to send the bloom! He loves it so much that he guarantees it to the Israelites every 50 years. Hardly a lifetime will pass that will not see an abundant year of jubilee and the select few will see more than one!

Scripture:

Leviticus 25:8-55

Jesus Story:

Luke 16:1-15

Additional Scripture Readings:

Psalm 24

Leviticus 26

Biography of the Land

A central but often overlooked theme in the Old Testament is the role of the land as a player in the covenant between God and his people. The relationship with the land begins in the Garden of Eden where God places Adam to care and maintain the garden. Upon his sinfulness, he is cast out, and he now has to work the land rather than just live off its abundance. Similarly, God calls Abraham out of Ur and into the promised land. So important is this land to the people that when those who are a part of the covenant die outside of the land, their bodies are transported into the land for their burial. Their final resting place must be in the land. The land is also tied to covenant faithfulness. As the people remain faithful, the land will be abundant to them. If they break covenant with God, Leviticus 18:28-29 says, "If you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you."

Land Stewardship in the Old Testament

The Old Testament provides one of the oldest philosophies of land stewardship that we have recorded. Not surprisingly some of the practices prescribed in the Mosaic law for how to treat the land are still applicable today. Many of these practices are now being prescribed by entirely secular conservationists oblivious to the historical heritage. A biblical theology of land stewardship is based on the idea that God entrusted the land to humans as a common inheritance and that humans are responsible for caring for the land. This is clearly lined out in Leviticus 25:23, "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers." The Mosaic Law offers many agricultural approaches, but one specific law (Ex. 23:10) is that the fields are to be planted for six years but always lay fallow in the seventh year. Likewise, we see in the year of Jubilee a seventh, seventh leaving the field to rest once again.

Discussion Guide

How does this year of jubilee give us insight into our relationship with the land? In what ways do we personally and collectively abuse the land for our own wealth?

How does the year of Jubilee give us insight into our relationship with fellow people?

How do you feel when you read through this passage? What does it provoke within you? Why do you think you feel this way?

Read the Jesus story for this week. How does this parable relate to the Levitical commands of the year of jubilee? What is Jesus teaching us through this parable?

Have you ever taken a plot of land, your yard, or maybe a garden and brought it from doom to bloom? What was it like for you? What did it teach you about God?

Prayer Guide

DAILY PRAYER : EVERY DAY THIS WEEK START A PRAYER WITH THIS LINE FROM LEVITICUS 25:10, "PROCLAIM LIBERTY THROUGHOUT THE LAND."

PRAYER PRACTICE : TAKE A WALK IN A GARDEN OR NEAR AN AGRICULTURE FIELD. PRAY FOR THAT LAND AND MEDITATE ON YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO IT.



Reading Guide

Title: Three Faithful Men

Theme: "They trusted in Him."

Purpose: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego show that trust in God is tested through fire but is formed in the daily practices of faithfulness. Despite the pull of political prowess, God is always our first and final allegiance.

Scripture:

Daniel 3

Jesus Story:

John 18:28-40

Additional Scripture Readings:

Proverbs 3:4-6

Isaiah 25

Background to Daniel

The Book of Daniel is set during the Babylonian exile of the 6th century BC after Babylon's first attack on Jerusalem in 586 BC. It tells the story of Daniel and his companions who remained faithful to God despite their role under the political powers of Babylon. The book is composed of two types of literature and two languages. The book of Daniel bounces back between narrative and apocalyptic literature, which was a common form of literature for the Jewish people. They used symbols and signs as a way to speak metaphorically against the Babylonian powers without getting in trouble. The first six chapters are narrative with the final seven being apocalyptic. The book is written in both Hebrew and Aramaic. The book of Daniel has three primary themes: faithful living in a culture opposed to God, comfort for God's people in their trials, and hope for God's final restoration.

Theology of Fire

Fire is an interesting symbol in the Bible. On the one hand, it symbolizes and even carries the overwhelming presence of Yahweh as seen in the burning bush, the pillar of fire, the altar of burnt offering, Elijah's altar, and even the descent of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2. On the other hand, fire serves as judgment such as in Genesis 3 where God places cherubims with flaming swords at the entrance to the garden of Eden, Ezekiel 22 where God's wrath is described as fire, or Genesis 19 where God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah through pillars of fire. Often these two motifs cannot be separated as God's fiery presence bears always his nature of Justice. A third motif we see in the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego is that trust in God is refined or tested through the fire. Similarly, the New Testament in 1st Peter 1:7 and 1st Corinthians 3:13 describes our trust as the kind of trust refined by fire.

Discussion Guide

You have probably encountered the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego many times in your faith journey. As you read the story this time, what stands out to you? What is something you have noticed for the first time in this story?

The word faith has come to mean many things in our culture today. If we replace it with the word trust, which is biblically consistent, how does it change our understanding of our relationship with God? Instead of saying I have faith in God, what does it mean to say I trust in God?

Read the Jesus story for this week. How does Jesus' encounter with king Pilate relate to the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego? What does it teach us about Jesus relationship to the politicians and power brokers of this world?

This passage gives us insight into how we should live in a political setting that is often opposed to the Kingdom of Christ. What takeaways or insights does this story give you?

Prayer Guide

DAILY PRAYER : EVERY DAY THIS WEEK START A PRAYER WITH THIS LINE FROM 1 SAMUEL 7:12, "WE WILL NOT SERVE OTHER GODS."

PRAYER PRACTICE : GET A LIST OF THOSE RUNNING FOR OFFICE IN YOUR UPCOMING ELECTION, PRAY FOR EVERY ONE OF THEM ON BOTH SIDES OF THE POLITICAL AISLE.

Reading Guide

Title: A Lion's Den

Theme: "They could find no corruption in him because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent."

Purpose: Often we read the story of Daniel as focused on his trust in God in the den, but the real focus of the story is on Daniel's conduct as a government official. He was without blame because he followed God.

Scripture:

Daniel 6

Jesus Story:

Matthew 22:15-22

Additional Scripture Readings:

Titus 3:1-2

Biography of Daniel

Daniel was a young Jewish man taken into captivity by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon around 604 BC. The king charged Ashpenaz to bring into his service "young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that, they were to enter the king's service." Daniel excelled at this role and rose to a prominent position in the government by correctly interpreting Nebuchadnezzar's dream. Daniel was faithful to the Jewish way of life and the covenant despite his role in the Babylonian government. He lived a long life but we have no record of his death.

Background of the Babylonian Empire

The Babylonian Empire had a complex history that included the founding of the city of Babylon, the rise of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, and the fall of the empire to the Persians. The city of Babylon was founded before the reign of Sargon of Akkad (2334-2279 BC). It was a small port city on the Euphrates River until Hammurabi made it the capital of his Empire (1792-1750 BC). The Neo-Babylonian Empire was established in 626 BC and lasted until 539 BC. It became the most powerful state in the world after defeating the Assyrians at Nineveh in 612 BCE. The Empire's capital was Babylon, which was decorated by King Nebuchadnezzar II. The Persian king Cyrus the Great defeated the Empire in 539 BC. Babylon remained an important cultural center even after the fall of the empire. The Babylonians were polytheistic and worshiped many gods and goddesses. They left behind many artifacts, including the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, which was one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Babylon is located in modern-day Iraq, about 50 miles south of Baghdad.

Discussion Guide

Why is Daniel's integrity such an important part of this narrative? How does his integrity stand out or differ from the other government officials? What does this provoke in them? How do you see his integrity throughout this entire narrative?

Daniel displays both strong integrity and strong trust in God. Why do these two things go together? What other biblical characters display both strong integrity and faith? How do you find in your own life the correlation between integrity and faith?

Read the Jesus story for this week. How would you relate Jesus and Daniel to one another? What is the lion's den that Jesus will face?

Daniel demonstrates well the proper alignment of work and Faith. His faith is always primary and above the allegiances of his job. In what ways do you struggle with this in your job? How have you found this relationship helpful in your job?

Prayer Guide

DAILY PRAYER : EVERY DAY THIS WEEK PRAY ALL OF DANIEL'S PRAYER FROM DANIEL 2:20-23.

PRAYER PRACTICE : DO AN INTEGRITY CHECK PRAYER THIS WEEK BY PRAYING AT YOUR WORKPLACE FOR GOD TO REVEAL TO YOU THE AREAS OF WORK IN WHICH YOUR INTEGRITY IS BEING TESTED

Reading Guide

Title: The Widow's Oil

Theme: "Your servant has nothing there at all."

Purpose: There are times in our life of doom when we truly feel as if we have nothing there at all. This story reminds us that God alone is always the one who brings bloom through the blessings of his word and his people.

Scripture:

2 Kings 4:1-7

Jesus Story:

Luke 18:1-8

Additional Scripture Readings:

Deuteronomy 10:12-22

1 Timothy 5:4-16

Widows and Orphans in the Bible

God has always kept widows and orphans close to his heart. It's one of the beautiful things about his law and his love for humanity. Throughout scripture, God is described as the defender of widows and a father of the fatherless. The Mosaic law routinely refers to taking care of foreigners, orphans, and widows. In fact, some of these commands are so fierce that God says he will take away wives and children from those who abuse orphans and widows. Even some of the commands around debt change when it comes to the context of widows. Throughout both the Old and New Testaments, we see widows as important characters in stories of miraculous healings. It is a widow who Jesus himself applauds at the temple for giving what little money she has. Paul teaches that widows and orphans are to be taken care of by the church if they cannot work for themselves or be taken

care of by their families. God's heart for widows and orphans is seen in these passages:

Exodus 22:22-24: "Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless."

Deuteronomy 24:17: "Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge."

Deuteronomy 24:19: "When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands."

Psalm 68:5: A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling.

1 Timothy 5:4: "But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God."

Discussion Guide

To the point in this study, we have been intentional about not trying to place emotions upon biblical characters but with this story, it seems impossible. How would you describe the emotions felt by the widow throughout this story? Have you ever been through something like this or known someone going through it?

The story is not only historically true but also is used as a greater teaching lesson in Israelite history. What metaphors or imagery catch your attention in this text and why?

Read the Jesus story for this week. How does the story of Elisha and the widow foreshadow this story of Jesus? What does this story teach about Jesus and who he is?

At some point in our lives, all of us hit a point that feels like complete doom whether financially, relationally, etc. How does the grand narrative of doom to bloom give us comfort and hope on these hard days?

— Prayer Guide

DAILY PRAYER : EVERY DAY THIS WEEK START A PRAYER WITH THIS LINE FROM 2 KINGS 4,
"YOUR SERVANT HAS NOTHING AT ALL."

PRAYER PRACTICE : POUR A SMALL BOWL OR JAR OF OIL AND PUT IT IN THE MIDDLE OF YOUR KITCHEN. EVERY TIME YOU NOTICE IT, PRAY FOR A WIDOW OR ORPHAN YOU KNOW.

Reading Guide

Title: Seven Baths

Theme: "Wash and be clean."

Purpose: It is easy in a world that opposes Christians to forget that God is still calling people from all tribes to wash and be clean. His message of hope extends beyond just "his people." In our lives, we must choose whether we will be Gehazi or Naaman's servant girl to those who oppose us.

Scripture:

2 Kings 5

Jesus Story:

Mark 1:40-44

Additional Scripture Readings:

Leviticus 13:1-46

Psalm 51

Biography of Elisha

Elisha was a prophet in ancient Israel, known for his role in succeeding Elijah as detailed in 1 & 2 Kings. Elisha was from Abel-meholah. He was a farmer until when plowing with twelve yoke of oxen Elijah cast his cloak over him, symbolizing his call to ministry. Elisha responded by leaving his work and following Elijah. Elisha took over Elijah's prophetic ministry after Elijah ascended to heaven. His ministry was marked by numerous miracles such as the healing of Naaman and the resurrection of the Shunammite's Son. Elisha played a crucial role in the political and social affairs of Israel. He interacted with various kings, providing counsel and delivering messages from God. His actions and prophecies often influenced the direction of the nation. After his death, even his bones were believed to have healing power, as a dead man who was thrown into Elisha's tomb came back to life upon touching his bones.

Background of Aram

Naaman is described as a commander in the army of Aram. The Kingdom of Aram-Damascus was an Aramean polity in the Bible that existed from the late 12th century BC until 732 BC. The kingdom was centered around Damascus and was bordered by Assyria to the north, Ammon to the south, and Israel to the west. The Bible often refers to the region as Aram, even though it was made up of several small states. In fact, the Arameans were never truly one people group. Instead, they were composed of many smaller regional powers across the area that is currently Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon. Genesis 10:22 describes the Arameans as a people group deriving from Aram, a grandson of Noah who settled in Mesopotamia. In 2 Kings 24, Aram helps the Babylonian Empire capture Judah during the reign of the unfaithful Judean king Jehoiakim.

Discussion Guide

This is a really neat and complex story. What different elements catch your attention and why? What different symbols or metaphors do you pick up on this passage?

At first, Naaman is angry because the prophet doesn't do what he expects him to. Have you ever turned away from God or wanted to when he didn't answer your request in the way you wanted? In what ways did God call you back and still restore you? Why do you think God often works this way in our lives?

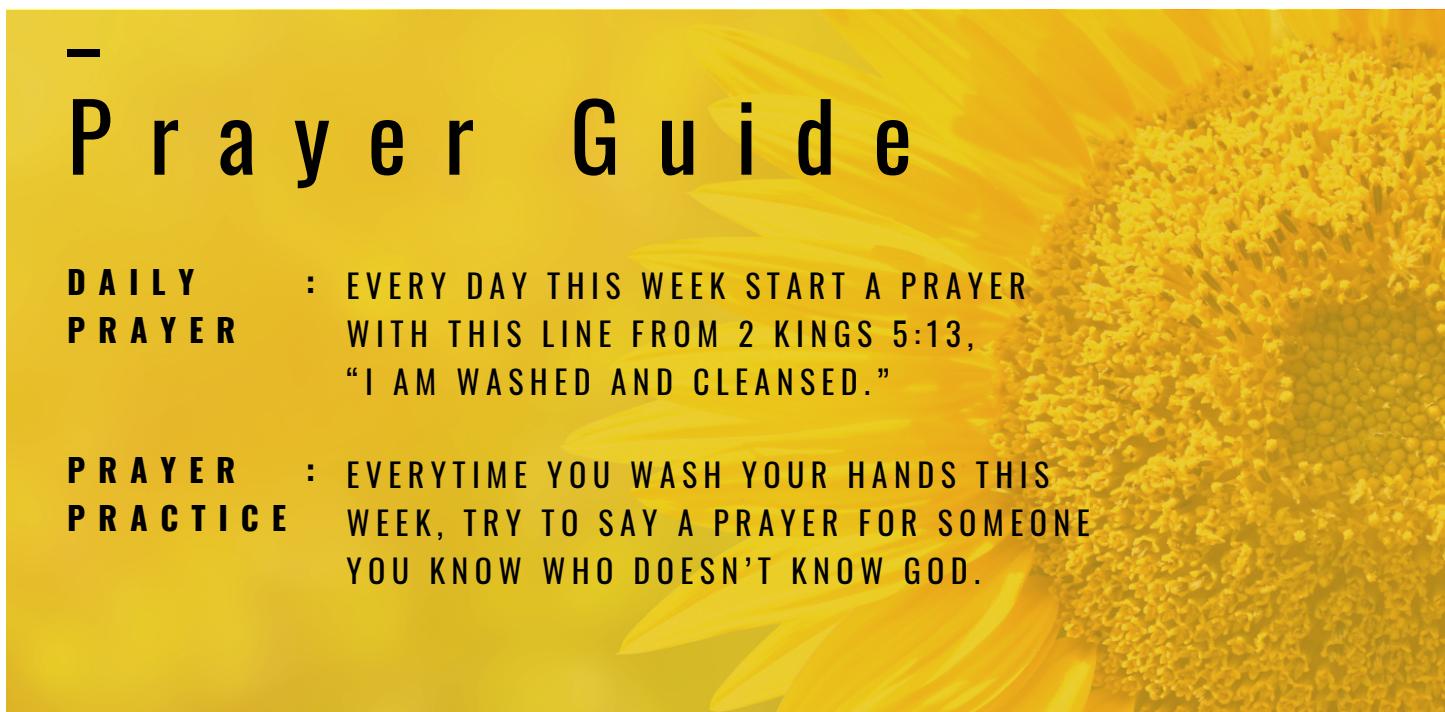
Read the Jesus story for this week. How would you relate Jesus' healing with the healing of Naaman? What catches your attention about the story of Jesus' healing? What do these two stories teach you about God?

There are a lot of different characters in this complex story. How many different people have a role in this passage? Briefly describe some of them: Naaman, the King of Aram, Naaman's servant girl, the king of Israel, Elisha, and Gehazi. Compare and contrast Gehazi and Naaman's servant girl. What do you think this passage is trying to teach us today?

Prayer Guide

DAILY PRAYER : EVERY DAY THIS WEEK START A PRAYER WITH THIS LINE FROM 2 KINGS 5:13, "I AM WASHED AND CLEANSED."

PRAYER PRACTICE : EVERYTIME YOU WASH YOUR HANDS THIS WEEK, TRY TO SAY A PRAYER FOR SOMEONE YOU KNOW WHO DOESN'T KNOW GOD.



Reading Guide

Title: War & Feast

Theme: "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them." And Elisha prayed, "Open his eyes, Lord, so that he may see."

Purpose: Elisha's trust in God and ability to see the larger vision of what God is doing in the world allows him to be unafraid *and to treat his enemies with honor.*

Scripture:

2 Kings 6:8-23

Jesus Story:

Matthew 26:47-56

Additional Scripture Readings:

Psalm 148

1 Corinthians 4:8-13

Angels in the Bible

Throughout the Bible, we see constant allusions and references to God's angels or heavenly servants. We tend to think of them as winged creatures mystically flying in and out of human awareness. In some senses, this is true, but the larger vision is of a heavenly army. God is at war with the principalities and Powers of the world. In the ancient polytheistic mind, he was at war with the other gods and his army was beyond the limitations of our world and our understanding. Maybe it's the echoes of "Touched by an Angel" still floating in our minds, but we usually think of angels as sweet and soft-spoken. Nothing could be further from how the Bible describes angels. The most common response to meeting one of God's angels is trembling in fear. Most people in the Bible who encounter an angel assume they are going to die. God's angelic army does not carry porcelain, but eternal swords of fire.

Angels serve many other roles, but most of them fall within the category of army roles. We first encounter angels as Cherubim placed alongside the garden of Eden to prevent Adam's return and protect the garden. They rescue Lot's family from fire and destruction in Genesis 19. They provide comfort and food to Elijah in 1st Kings 19. Similarly, it's an angel who appears to Hagar and gives her direction and comfort in Genesis 16. They are messengers as in the visions received by Daniel. Exodus describes God's Angel army as going alongside the Israelites through their wandering and battle with the Egyptians. An interesting but often overlooked discussion of angels occurs with the minor prophet Zachariah who has an extended conversation and vision of an angel. The Psalms describe a great angel chorus continually giving praise and glory to God along with all of creation. An angel army appears in the Gospels to proclaim the Good News of the birth of Jesus. Finally, John's revelation is loaded with angels who are messengers, destroyers, and protectors.

Discussion Guide

This might be my favorite story in the Old Testament. It has so many layers and nuances. What stands out to you in this passage? What makes you chuckle in this passage? Is there any moment in this passage where you say, "Yep! That's me!"

When it seems everything is doom, our vision tends to get narrow. Yet this passage reminds us to see big even during the doom. As you reflect upon your doom to bloom story, how was God at work in ways that you couldn't see or understand at that time?

I believe this story remained apart of Jewish history because of the way it taught the Israelites to deal with their enemies. How do the Israelites deal with their enemies in this passage? What can we learn from this?

Read the Jesus story for this week. How does it relate to the story of the blind Arameans? What do these two passages teach us about God's view of violence?

As we finish up the last week of the study, what are some of your major takeaways? What do you want to remember from this study?

Prayer Guide

DAILY PRAYER : EVERY DAY THIS WEEK START A PRAYER WITH THIS LINE FROM 2 KINGS 6:17, "OPEN MY EYES, LORD, THAT I MAY SEE."

PRAYER PRACTICE : MEDITATE ON A SITUATION OR PLACE THAT GIVES YOU FEAR. ASK GOD TO OPEN YOUR EYES TO HIS ANGEL ARMY IN THAT PLACE.