

# bible<sup>+</sup>study: july 2020

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*Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series*

## **July 5, 2020 Text: Jeremiah 23:1-8 “God’s Care for the Remnant”**

Those of us who are pastors and those of us who have other leadership positions in the church would do well to take a deep breath before reading this week’s study text. Shepherds—some students of the Bible say that is a metaphor for kings or other leaders—have messed up and God’s sheep, God’s people, are scattered into exile (Jeremiah 23:1-2). Here’s a heavy truth: God holds us accountable for the responsibilities God has given us.

God will not long leave God’s people without good leaders (Jeremiah 23:5). Both the northern kingdom (Israel) and the southern kingdom (Judah) will live in safety (Jeremiah 23:6). The name of the one who will lead such a restoration is “The Lord is our righteousness” (Jeremiah 23:6).

For me, that sixth verse begs a question: if not God, just whom have we claimed as our “righteousness,” our standard, our source of prosperity? Too often, we have looked to other places to find our measuring stick for life’s values. Do we measure by popularity? Do we measure by wealth? Do we measure by our own decisions? (Maybe the Sunday after the Fourth of July is a good time to ask those questions!)

This week’s study text has the feel of “before and after.” It begins with a dismal picture of how God’s people have been misled by those who were to care for the flock. But just as surely as those shepherds have failed, God will provide leaders for a better tomorrow. The promise is

deliverance from exile in order to “live in their own land.” We are left with the questions: Where are we now exiled from God’s intent? Where are we now exiled from God’s purposes? Where are we now exiled from where God would want us to be?

The prophet gives a glimpse of a better future. Instead of living in a world of anger, let us live in a world of peace. Instead of living in a world of untruth, let us live in a world of truth. Instead of living in a world of dismay, let us live in a world of confidence. Instead of living in a world of fear, let us live in a world of hope.

Such are the gifts of God.

### **What Someone Else Has Said:**

A. W. Drury has written (*The Life of Rev. Philip William Otterbein*, University Press of the Pacific): “To deny the possibility of this assurance was to go against the Scriptures, and to cast away the essential consistency of Christianity. Why should not so great a change as that from death unto life, from the disfavor to the favor of God, have a witness in (our) inmost experience?”

### **Prayer:**

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God of tomorrow, thank You...

## **July 12, 2020 Text: Daniel 1:8-17 “The Community’s Connection to God”**

The evening sun has gone down. Life in the kitchen has been stirring around the pots and pans. Mom and Dad have been putting together supper for the family. The children have come in from last minute playtime with their friends. “Yes, I got my homework done,” one of them responds. “What’s for supper?” the other asks. Then, the moment of revelation. “Ugh! Yuck! I’m not eating that!” And there on each plate was the green innocence of broccoli.

That’s the image that came to my mind as I read this text about Daniel and his friends pleading to get vegetables to eat, instead of the rich fare of the royal household. It was not just that these fellows were on a health kick; to eat what the king provided would call for loyalty to the king and these Judean young men in exile did not want to do that. Their loyalty was to Yahweh.

The king had already tried to give them a Babylonian identity instead of a Hebrew identity. He did that by giving them all Babylonian names to replace their Hebrew names (Daniel 1:6). (What you call somebody says a lot about what you think of that person.)

Daniel and his friends had a lot going for them. They were good-looking (Daniel 1:4) and were in great physical shape (Daniel 1:4). They were bright, well-informed, and must have done well on their SAT’s!

No wonder the king and his staff wanted to train these men for royal duty (Daniel 1:5).

## **July 19, 2020 Text: Daniel 3:19-30 “God Is With the Faithful”**

This is one of the most familiar accounts in the Old Testament: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3:19-30). It’s a favorite story for children’s Sunday School classes. It’s a reassurance for us when life’s journey puts us into seemingly impossible circumstances.

There is a lot we could explore in these verses. Why do non-believers try to make believers look bad (Daniel 3:8-12)? Why was the powerful Nebuchadnezzar so insecure about the witness of three Jewish men (Daniel 3:13)? What about the faith of the three men allowed them to be okay with either living or dying (Daniel 3:17)? Why were these three Judeans so adamant about not worshiping as the Babylonians did (Daniel 3:18)?

But let’s look at one other place in this story. What about the mysteri-

It sounds like a good deal, but faithfulness to God trumps all these worldly benefits.

The story goes on to have Daniel becoming a helpful interpreter of dreams and as one who had great (if strange) visions of how God will rescue and restore God’s people. But in this week’s study, the heart of the matter is the willingness to risk life itself in order to be faithful to God.

Notice that Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah are, in a sense, stand-ins for the entire Hebrew people. And me, how does the way I behave in public places reflect on the entire Christian community? What do others think of Christians when they see how I act? (I get nervous when a text seems to get personal!) God brings gifts of insight and skill to these men so they can continue to be God’s dependable servants. Let us pray for the same.

### **What Someone Else Has Said:**

Richard Heitzenrater (*Mirror and Memory*, Kingswood Books) says: “Love of God manifests itself in a virtuous life.”

### **Prayer:**

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Shape me in Your image, O God, that I might love as You love...”

ous fourth figure in the furnace with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Daniel 3:25)? It was the pagan king Nebuchadnezzar who pointed it out to the crowd (Daniel 3:24-25). Nebuchadnezzar no doubt believed in multiple gods (Daniel 3:25) and figured that this was one of those gods.

For believers, there is recognition that God shows up in lots of places and never looks the same. It is not surprising to find God’s messenger (translation of the word “angel”—Daniel 3:28) in the midst of the fray. God shows up! Sometimes God might look like a friend who supports us in a time of loss. Sometimes God might look like an author who wisely challenges some misunderstanding we have carried. Sometimes God might look like a homeless person who waits in McDonald’s until the heavy rain stops. Sometimes God might look like a storm that helps us make a difficult decision. Sometimes God might look like a

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Table of grain and grape.

It does not surprise me that God shows up in the furnace. What does surprise me is that Nebuchadnezzar recognizes and even celebrates the presence of the divine. He throws his royal prestige and power around those who believe in the God of this community (Daniel 3:29). Would that my faith would be such that non-believers come to faith! When does my witness invite others into faith?

**What Someone Else Has Said:**

In Wesleyan Beliefs: *Formal and Popular Expressions of the Core*

**July 26, 2020 Text: Nehemiah 9:9-17, 32-33 “Remembering the Lord’s Mighty Deeds”**

Nehemiah is a “tell it like it is” book. The author describes the shameful ways that Judah had disobeyed God and the rebellious ways the people committed blasphemies against God (Nehemiah 9:26). In spite of all that, God remained gracious and merciful and continued to give God’s people a new beginning (Nehemiah 9:31).

Much of the work of Nehemiah (and his compatriot, Ezra) was to get regular worship and temple practices started again after the exile (Ezra 3, 5, 6). In the midst of the turmoil and struggle and disagreement that faced Jerusalem, they sought to provide a place and a routine that would bring stability to a shattered people.

Why do you and I tend to return to the same place for worship each week? There is a comfort and encouragement in the familiar. Whether we follow liturgy or whether we like a service that unfolds on its own, we usually seek the same kind of experience each week. In a cultural time of unrest and shifting values, there is something reassuring about being a part of a ritual that goes back hundreds of years or being part of a tradition of always trying to be in the present tense. That is what Ezra and Nehemiah were doing in Jerusalem: getting the richness of tradition established again. It was important for the identity of a people who had been away in foreign exile for generations.

The early Methodist societies learned from John Wesley that there are

*Beliefs of Wesleyan Communities* (Kingswood Books), Ted A. Campbell has written: “The evangelistic mission of Wesleyan communities is grounded in this claim of universal prevenient grace and its implications, that all persons can come to Christian faith.”

**Prayer:**

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God of mysterious presence, come and dwell among us...”

spiritual habits that become God’s way of giving grace (the means of grace). These habits include the public worship of God, the ministry of the Word either read or expounded, the Supper of the Lord, Family and private prayer, Searching the Scriptures, Fasting or abstinence. (See paragraph 104 in *The Book of Discipline*). None of these is a one time event. Much of their life-giving strength comes from their repetition.

That is what Nehemiah is trying to provide for the Hebrew people. The restored temple was both a symbol and the reality of such repetition. Spiritually, sometimes we disappear into exile. Let us rebuild the temples in our Jerusalems, finding those traditions, values, and practices that remind us that God is good...all the time.

**What Someone Else Has Said:**

*The United Methodist Book of Worship* (UMPH) has this note: “While the freedom and diversity of United Methodist worship are greater than can be represented by any single order of worship, United Methodists also affirm a heritage of order and the importance of specific guidance and modeling that an order of worship provides.”

**Prayer:**

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “The Lord is in His holy temple...”

