

## **SOUTH GEORGIA ADVOCATE – MAY 4 EDITION**

### **Bishop Bryan announces retirement**

In a [heartfelt video](#), Bishop R. Lawson Bryan, episcopal leader of the South Georgia Area of The United Methodist Church, announced his intent to retire, effective Sept. 1, 2021.

“It has been a great joy, and I thank you for the willingness you have had for us to be in ministry together. We are greatly blessed by the South Georgia Conference,” [he said in the video](#). “In every way, this Conference is ready, not only for today, but even for tomorrow, because we are being Alive Together in Christ.”

Elected bishop July 14, 2016, at the Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference’s quadrennial meeting at Lake Junaluska, N.C., Bishop Bryan began serving as South Georgia’s resident bishop on Sept. 1, 2016.

No decision has yet been made about who will succeed Bishop Bryan as South Georgia’s episcopal leader. The Southeastern Jurisdiction (SEJ) Committee on Episcopacy and the College of Bishops are working together on a plan for coverage that will consider recommendations from Bishop Bryan and South Georgia’s members of the Committee on Episcopacy.

In his announcement to the Conference, Bishop Bryan expressed his desire to spend more time with his family.

“Through this intentional process, I have discerned with clarity that it is time for me to turn my full attention to my family,” he said. “I began seminary 50 years ago. Since that time, our lives have been shaped by appointments, moves, and denominational matters. I have no regrets. What I do have, though, is confirmation that now is the time for me to focus my energies more directly on those whose love has sustained me.”

During his five years serving the South Georgia Conference - four years plus an additional year due to the postponement of the 2020 General Conference and Jurisdictional Conference because of the coronavirus pandemic - Bishop Bryan has focused on finding fresh ways to be alive together in collaborative leadership. He has worked to build teams like the Compass Group and Laity Cabinet that affirm the giftedness of the Conference’s laity and clergy.

With clarity, focus, and conviction that God’s guidance for him as the episcopal leader of South Georgia is found in Ephesians 2:5, “God has made us alive together in Christ,” Bishop Bryan has served South Georgia with faithfulness and tireless dedication, Conference leaders say.

“Sherrill and I love the South Georgia Conference and are thankful for the unwavering support the laity and clergy have so generously given to us,” he said. “We will always be Alive Together in Christ with our South Georgia family.”

[CLICK HERE TO WATCH A VIDEO FROM BISHOP BRYAN](#)



## Churches host COVID vaccine clinics

By Kara Witherow, *Editor*

On a sunny Saturday morning in March, more than 500 people showed up at St. Mary's Road United Methodist Church in south Columbus.

In the short span of three hours, 515 people received the COVID-19 vaccine, an "awesome" feat, said Dr. Pamela Shaw-Grant, St. Mary's Road UMC's wellness ministry chair.

Scheduled for Saturday so more people could attend, the church's vaccine clinic offered both drive-thru and walk-up service to allow access to as many people as possible.

"It was a lot of work, like a full-time job, but it was worth it," said Dr. Shaw-Grant, a physician's assistant and a member of St. Mary's Road UMC.

The church's vaccine clinic was overwhelmingly popular, Dr. Shaw-Grant said, stating that she received phone calls afterwards requesting another.

Partnering with the Columbus Health Department, Dr. Shaw-Grant and 12 volunteer medical professionals, most from the St. Mary's Road UMC congregation, administered the single-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

"We all felt a sense of accomplishment; we were helping people and giving them something that they needed," she said. "It was very rewarding."

In Marshallville, Rev. Brian Litch wants his church to be the first church in town with a sign that advertises free hugs.

He's kidding about the sign, but he is more than ready for folks to feel safe congregating and gathering with one another in the church's sanctuary again.

As a chaplain with the local police department, Rev. Litch received the COVID-19 vaccination early, but knew there were many in the community who didn't have easy access to it.

"I knew there were a lot of people who didn't have the transportation and means to get the vaccine," he said.

The church – on the opposite side of the county from the health department – has an ideal parking lot for drive-through events, Rev. Litch said. After several calls with city and county officials, he and the congregation partnered with the Macon County Health Department to host a vaccine clinic Monday, April 19.

"We tried to make this as accessible as possible to everybody in the Marshallville community," he said. "We have people in Marshallville who were vaccinated now that weren't last week. We are grateful for it."

With its new Family Life Center, Perry United Methodist Church hopes to "build a bridge to and from the community," said senior pastor Dr. Brad Brady.

The church's recent Community COVID Clinic, held April 21, is just one way the congregation is reaching out to serve its community.

Partnering with Houston Healthcare, church leaders opened the Family Life Center and organized volunteers to greet, register, and help patients.

"We want more and more of our people to be vaccinated, as many as possible," said Dr. Brady, noting the church's location on the south side of Houston County. More than 30 people received the vaccine at Perry UMC's clinic, including several young adults and teenagers.

It's important for churches to be involved with a person's whole health, not just their spiritual health, said Dr. Shaw-Grant, because it shows the congregation's love.

"This was a way to let people know that we care about you, we care about your health," she said. "I knew this was the only way some people would be vaccinated. The vaccine is the way, the key. This is a passion of mine."

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## **Don Barnes elected UMM president**

**By Kara Witherow, *Editor***

Don Barnes is the newly elected president of the South Georgia Conference's United Methodist Men.

An active member of Cordele First United Methodist Church, Barnes has served as South Georgia's United Methodist Men's secretary for more than a decade and has been involved in men's ministry at the local, district, and conference level.

Barnes will formally assume the role on June 7, at the end of the 2021 Annual Conference session, but has already begun to work on a transition of leadership as he fills the remaining three years of the late Henry Holt's term of service. Holt, who was elected Conference UM Men president last August, died January 30.

"I have known Don Barnes for many years and he truly is a servant leader," said Donald Rhodes, past South Georgia UMM president. "He will focus on helping our men grow in Christ so that other men may come to know Christ. I am excited about working with him in the coming years to grow our UMM ministries and missions."

A lifelong Methodist, Barnes' formative years were spent at Warwick United Methodist Church. He and his wife, Karen, have been married 42 years and have two daughters and three granddaughters. Barnes, who graduated from Crisp County High School and attended Southern Technical Institute in Marietta, has worked in the engineering field for the past 30 years. He currently works at Cordele Metal Works.

A guiding verse in Barnes' life is Joshua 24:15.

"We have to choose this day who we will serve," he said. "I think that's a daily process."

As a young man, Barnes was greatly influenced by older men who were involved in the Conference's United Methodist Men, among them Carson Bass; Dennis Odom; B.I. Thornton, Jr.; Roy Lifsey; Larry Price; Chuck Cowart; and Donald Rhodes, and attended his first UMM retreat as a college student.

Barnes believes the UMM should be an active ministry, making disciples and being the hands and feet of Christ.

"My goal is, as much as possible, to have us involved in a grassroots level, where the rubber meets the road, so to speak," he said.

To do that, he plans to work closely with the existing leadership and reach out and involve younger men. He appreciates the guidance and support of Rhodes and other UMM leaders.

Barnes also points to Henry Holt and his legacy and says he had looked forward to what Holt – a devoted follower of Christ, active member of St. Mary's Road UMC, and beloved figure in the Columbus area – would have brought to the UMM.

"We're looking at trying to bring as many men together – maybe not physically yet – but at least in ministry, as possible."

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## **Book of Recommendations & Reports for the 2021 Annual Conference Session now available**

The [2021 Book of Recommendations and Reports](#) is now available for ordering and download.

Business items for the 2021 Annual Conference session are contained in the *Book of Recommendations and Reports* (BOR). One of the purposes of the BOR is to encourage delegates to read the recommendations, reports, and resolutions prior to arriving at conference. A good delegate is a prepared delegate.

The 2015 Annual Conference session voted that all Annual Conference materials, including the *Book of Recommendations and Reports*, be made available online on the conference website and through other electronic means. The BOR is now available for download as a PDF file at no cost in its entirety or in sections. You can also purchase it for \$6 (plus tax and shipping) as a professionally bound book through [lulu.com](http://lulu.com). Additionally, a version has been designed specifically for those wishing to utilize the information in electronic form only.

In addition to the Book of Recommendations and Reports, additional reports will be made available that should be viewed or read prior to the Annual Conference Session to help prepare you for reports given during our Annual Conference virtual session. The reports will be posted here as soon as they are available.

**Option #1: On-demand printing of the 2021 *Book of Recommendations and Reports* through LULU.com.**

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**Full version of the 2021 *Book of Recommendations and Reports* for printing/Electronic Viewing:**

[2021 Book of Recommendations and Reports](#) (129 pages)

**Section versions of the 2021 *Book of Recommendations and Reports* for printing/Electronic Viewing:**

[Section 1 - Preparing for Annual Conference](#) (14 pages)

[Section 2 - Recommendations](#) (43 pages)

[Section 3 - Consent Calendar](#) (Reports) (82 pages)

*\*The Conference is using [www.Lulu.com](http://www.Lulu.com), an online print-on-demand publishing company, to print the 2021 Book of Recommendations and Reports. Orders will be made and processed via their secure website and shipped directly from their facility.*

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**Join our May 11 “Alive Together at the Table” conversation**

Join us at noon on Tuesday, May 11 as we gather around a virtual table for a time of reflection, conversation, and connection. We'll be talking with other South Georgia people about things that matter to South Georgia. We can't wait to see you! [Register](#)

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**A kingdom that cannot be shaken**

**FROM THE BISHOP  
R. LAWSON BRYAN**

Reflecting on the past global pandemic year, psychologist James F. Schroeder begins one of his blog posts with these words:

*Temperate, sunny days usually teach us little, except that we want more of them. But the harshness of an undesired season has a particular way of engendering lessons, which although begrudged and disdained, can stick with us for a long time – if we are open to them.*

We certainly have experienced the harshness of several undesired seasons, each overlapping the other: COVID-19, multiple, high-visibility incidents of violence toward people of color, and political polarization around the nation. Local churches, the very groups that bring people together, have seen their own best efforts constricted due to the efforts to control the spread of the virus.

Now, thankfully, we are seeing infection rates lower than they have been in a year. Testing is readily available. Vaccines are out and the vaccination rate is steadily growing. Mask mandates and other health precautions are being revised to reflect the positive direction in which things are going. Our local churches are resuming in-person services and other activities. But they are doing this with full awareness that there is no one-size-fits-all approach. They are encouraging their members to come if they are comfortable. They are recognizing that those with special conditions need to make choices based on their individual needs. In other words, our local churches are demonstrating good judgment by offering options to their members and guests, while moving forward intentionally.

This seems like a good time to accept Dr. Schroeder’s invitation to identify the lessons learned over the past year. To me, one very important lesson is found in Hebrews 12:26-29. This passage recalls how the earth shook when God appeared on Mt. Sinai and how God also said, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven” (Haggai 2:6). The shaking of earth and heaven results in “. . .the removal of what is shaken – that is, created things – so that what cannot be shaken may remain.” It is when things are all out of kilter and life is shaken up that we find out if there is anything in our lives that is so solid it cannot be shaken.

*Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe, for indeed our God is a consuming fire.* Hebrews 12:28-29

Through Jesus Christ, we are being given a kingdom that cannot be shaken. Our world is being shaken by a global health crisis, a reckoning with racism, and a toxic political climate that brings out the worst in us rather than inviting the best. But what if that is not the final word? What if there is a kingdom that cannot be shaken? What if you and I are ambassadors of that unshakeable kingdom (2 Cor. 5:20)? What if your local church were to be a manifestation of the kingdom that cannot be shaken? What if such unshakeable people are the only ones who can actually overcome crises, dismantle racism, and change the political climate?

That would be God’s gift to the anxious, troubled, fearful, angry, over-reactive world in which we find ourselves.

Is this the big lesson of our time? Are we open to it?

Alive Together as ambassadors of the kingdom that cannot be shaken,

R. Lawson Bryan



## **Offering Hope for the Future**

**Spring Quarter: Prophets Faithful To God's Covenant**

**Unit 3: Courageous Prophets of Change**

**Sunday school lesson for the week of May 9, 2021**

**By Dr. Hal Brady**

**Lesson Scripture: Isaiah 29:13-24**

**Key Verse: Isaiah 29:24**

### **Lesson Aims**

1. Describe God's intentions regarding the spiritual condition of Israel.
2. Give an example of a similar condition today.
3. Create a personal plan to guard against unfaithful worship.

### **Lesson Context**

Scholars tell us that the word "Isaiah" means "Jehovah is salvation" and that a predominant theme of the book of Isaiah is God's sovereignty over history. The fictitious pagan fertility gods were imagined to be caught in never-ending cycles of birth, life, and death. For pagans, history endlessly turned on itself. Their gods were doomed to the same repetitious beats as were mere mortals.

But by contrast, the God of Israel stood outside history. Since he brought all things into being (Isaiah 40:21-31) it simply couldn't be otherwise. God demonstrated mastery over history by giving Isaiah visions of what would occur before, during, and after the Babylonian exile. That tragedy extended from the destruction of the temple in 538 BC until release from captivity in 530 BC.

However, the most immediate new thing that God would do was to use a foreign power, Assyria, to accomplish his will by disciplining Israel for their sin and corruption. During Isaiah's tenure as a prophet (740-681 BC), Assyria was the region's sole superpower. Founded in Mesopotamia in about 1750 BC, that nation's period of most military expansion began in about 1100 BC.

We are informed that Assyria's most coveted prize, Egypt, lay to the west. However, several smaller nations on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, including the divided northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah, stood in its path. Therefore, the risk of invasion was always present.

Two centuries prior to Isaiah's time, King Solomon had accumulated immense wealth through his initiative of international commerce. That fact, along with prosperity in the interim, made the

covenant people an appealing target for the aggressive Assyrian Empire. Both Israel and Judah experienced years of prosperity after they divided into two kingdoms (Isaiah 2:7). Assyria menaced both for years.

Even though the threat lessened with the reign of less hostile Assyrian monarchs, things changed for the worst when Tiglath-Pileser III reigned (745-727 BC). He renewed Assyrian designs against both Israel and Judah (2 Kings 15:29). The prophets Hosea and Amos had issued the earlier warnings, in the eighth century BC (examples: Hosea 10:6; Amos 3:11). At the time, their prophets must have sounded absurd to a nation enjoying peace. But during Isaiah's ministry as a prophet, predicted doom became reality.

Now, Ahaz, king of Judah from 735 to 715 BC, allied with Assyria to prevent aggression by Aram and northern Israel by paying steep tribute in the process (2 Kings 16:7-8). Eventually, however, he rebelled against Assyria and shifted allegiance to Egypt.

The prophets warned both northern Israel and southern Judah against such entanglements, but they were ignored (Hosea 7:11, 16). Point? God instructed both nations to put their trust in Him, not pagan empires and their fictitious gods.

Beginning in the time of Hezekiah's reign (about 726-695 BC), Isaiah predicted five "Woe Sermons" that included further warnings against such alliances. These five "woes" on the people of the Lord (chapter 28-33) are the following: one on the drunkards and scoffers (28); one on the deceivers of God (29), our text; one on the rebellious who show confidence in humankind, not God (30); one on those who make alliance with the enemy (31-32); and one on treacherous destroyers (33).

The "woe" sermons establish the rationale behind God's judgment yet also offer hope that God would someday restore the nation predicted to fall. Today's study concerns both.

## **Unfaithful Worship**

### **Isaiah 29:18-14**

The failure to heed the contents of the scroll in Isaiah 29:11-12 is a sad observation regarding ignorance of the Word of the Lord.

The late Dr. Billy Graham once said: "one of the greatest tragedies today is that although the Bible is an available, open book, it is a closed book to millions – either because they leave it unread or because they read it without applying its teachings to themselves. No greater tragedy can befall humankind as a nation than paying lip service to a Bible left unread or a way of life not followed."

Thus, the characterization we see here is insincere piety. The people's worship was little more than going through the motions; it was empty and meaningless. "With their mouths and with their lips" the people professed loyalty and devotion to God, but their hearts weren't in it.

Isaiah had confessed his own and his people's unclean lips when he was called by God (Isaiah 6:5). Here the lips appeared to speak what was right. But whatever pious words they uttered were nullified by hearts that had little passion or desire for a genuine relationship with God. And centuries later, Jesus would apply these very words to the teachers of the law and Pharisees in his day (Matthew 15:1-9; Mark 7:5-8). There, Jesus adds his own characterization: "hypocrites."

In verse 14, the Lord vows to get the attention of these people whose worship is simply "learned by rote" by doing "shocking" and "amazing" things. Literally the promise is, "I will treat this people wonderfully, wonderfully and with wonder."

But what is this wonderfully wonderful wonder? The second half of the verse before us is cited by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:19 as justification for his statement, "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us, who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18). Paul goes on to comment on how God has "made foolish the wisdom of the world" and brought it down to nothing by means of the cross (1 Corinthians 1:9-25).

The cross of Christ should move us to humble worship – the kind that was sadly missing in Isaiah's day. No "mere human ruler" (Isaiah 29:13), no matter what they may be, can produce the degree of worship that the wonder of the cross can. So may we who have accepted the crucified and risen Christ as savior never lose our sense of wonder even in the face of the world's ridicule.

It has been correctly stated that the mood of true religion is one of wonder and expectation. Whenever religious people lose this mood, we may be sure they have lost their way.

The late Bishop Gerald Kennedy once described the church as the "dwelling place of wonder." Oh, how I like that! At its best, it is!

## **Unfaithful Plans**

### **Isaiah 29:15-21**

Scholars inform us that the text before us consists of three sections, related in that the second two parts respond to and interpret the first. The section begins (vv. 15-16) with another prophetic woe speech indicting the addressees in terms of their actions. They are doing the unthinkable, believing they can hide their plans from God.

The second part (vv. 17-21) contains an announcement of the Lord's own plan, to bring salvation through a transformation of nature and destruction of "the tyrant," the "scoffer," and evil-doers.

The final section (vv. 22-24), both linked to and set off from the preceding by an introductory "therefore," gives another announcement of salvation for the "house of Jacob."

Those who view themselves to be wise and intelligent are frequently those who "go to great depths to hide their plans from the Lord." The wayward seem to think that God is subject to the

same limitations that restrict humans. Supposedly, he cannot know or see what is planned or done “in darkness.” But as David rightly observes in Psalm 139:12, “even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.”

The reason the plotters and schemers of Isaiah 29:15 think and act as they do is that they have a faulty view of God. They have turned his authority structure “upside down.” And such is the inevitable outcome when humans refuse to acknowledge that they are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26). They think of themselves as the potter, as if they were in charge.

True worship can never come from a mindset that considers human beings to be the potter. This displays the utmost contempt for the true potter, who is God alone. Ignoring the prophet’s insistence to trust God instead of pagan nations was absurd.

Specifically, Isaiah is attacking Jerusalem’s reliance on Egypt for relief from Assyrian aggression. In effect, the leadership has refused to take the prophet’s word seriously as the word of God. They have been both arrogant and faithless.

Instead of the expected announcement of judgment following an indictment, this passage (29:17-21) announces salvation and the establishment of justice. It brims with “reversals” of previous proclamations of judgment against God’s people.

“Lebanon” in verse 17 was known for its forests, which supplied lumber for building projects (see 2 Chronicles 2:8-9). To take a majestic forest and create “a fertile field” from it isn’t a comment on the quality of the forest or the field as much as it is that of massive reversal. Likewise, fields that had already proven themselves fertile would become instead “forest.” Isaiah used these upheaval images as metaphors for the massive changes Israel would undergo when God renewed them in ways they never expected. This theme continues through the end of our lesson.

In the announcement of reversals, we see that there is a message concerning power and the powerful, proclaiming the reversal of stature. The deaf will hear, the blind see, the meek and needy will celebrate, the tyrant and scoffer will be no more, and those who corrupt the courts to deny justice to those who need it will be cut off.

Those who find themselves oppressed will rejoice over how God acts on their behalf. A key phrase here is “the Holy One of Israel (v.19). It occurs in 31 verses in the Old Testament and 25 of those are in Isaiah. The rejoicing of which this verse speaks is to be found in Him (Isaiah 12:6), not in pagan nations (Isaiah 10:20; 31:1). He is the Maker, the Sovereign Lord, the Redeemer, and the Lord Almighty.

The unholy spirits of demonic realm correctly recognized the Holy one in the person of Jesus (Mark 1:24; Luke 4:34). Some humans also correctly came to recognize him that way as well

(Acts 3:14; 1 John 2:20). In the Beatitudes, Jesus echoed the promise in this and other verses we have discussed (Matthew 5:5, Luke 6:20).

## **Faithful Worship**

### **Isaiah 29:22-24**

God assured the nation by invoking the names of two patriarchs with whom God had established his covenant centuries before (Exodus 2:24; etc.). But the record of Scripture is that God's people proved themselves incapable and unwilling to maintain a holy status before God. Moses had introduced God's perfect law to the people (Exodus 20), but they did not obey it. Important point! Their restoration then was not precipitated by unused effort on their part, but in God's unilateral act of mercy.

If, at the time of restoration, Jacob were to observe "Israel," the nation bearing his name, as changed by God (Genesis 32:28), he would see renewed devotion to God. In spite of the Israelites unfaithfulness, they will remain as God's creative "work." As such, God has remained committed to them until he finishes what he started in them. Human unfaithfulness does not deter God (2 Timothy 2:13).

To keep God's "name holy" is to acknowledge God's inherent holiness. Simply stated, we cannot add to God's holiness. But we can add to the number of those who know and honor his holiness and who also worship him. Israel would come to worship and obey God with a sense of awe and reverence when he turns everything upside down (see Isaiah 29:17).

So how do we revere or honor God's name? We honor God's name by our words, our worship, and our witness. We also honor God's name when we honor what God honors and, of course, that is humankind.

Now, God's love for Israel in his settlement and resettlement (reformation) were only shadows of God's act of mercy ultimately accomplished through the word of Christ on that cross. Paul wrote, "if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). We come to Christ admitting that we depend on his generous gift of salvation (Ephesians 2:8,9) and the "rest" in our eternal home that is to follow (Hebrews 4).

## **Conclusion**

Today's scripture passage offers hope to all those who feel distanced from God despite any robust spiritual heritage. In every generation, churches are filled with those who have devoted themselves fully to God. Yet at the same time these churches are also filled with those who attend out of habit or a sense of duty. Outsiders may consider this latter group to be highly religious. However, the true spiritual state of this latter group is not unknown to God. He feels the coldness of their worship. He sees the plans they made without consulting him in prayer or

study of scripture. And the careless ways these congregants treat their neighbor are not hidden from God.

Critically important! The way back now is the same as it was in Isaiah's day.

First, we need to live mindful of the reality that God judges each person justly. God sees our true spiritual condition, even if we don't allow ourselves the same insight.

Second, we need to repent of our sins.

Third, we need to realize that God the Father, through the completed works of Jesus Christ and the present indwelling of his Holy Spirit, is able and willing to free us so we can love him with the entirety of our hearts, souls, and abilities (Matthew 22:37).

Fourth, we need to decide if we are willing to allow God to renew us.

As Bishop Mike Watson used to put it, "Dear God, let it be!"

### **Action Plan**

1. What self-tests can you conduct to ensure that your heart matches what you say about God?
2. What can you do to protect yourself from spiritual blindness and deafness?
3. What can and should you include in your prayers that will correctly acknowledge God's positions relative to yours?

### **Resources for this lesson**

1. "2020-2021 Standard Lesson Commentary, Uniform Series, International Bible Lessons for Christian Teaching," pages 305-312.
2. "The New Interpreter's Bible Volume VI" pages 243-249.
3. "Interpretation a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Isaiah 1-39" by Christopher R. Seitz, pages 212-215.
4. "A Popular Survey of the Old Testament," by Norman L. Geisler, pages 245-246.

*Dr. Hal Brady is a retired pastor who continues to present the Good News of Jesus Christ and offer encouragement in a fresh and vital way through Hal Brady Ministries ([halbradyministries.com](http://halbradyministries.com)).*

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## **Preaching Doom**

**Spring Quarter: Prophets Faithful To God's Covenant**  
**Unit 3: Courageous Prophets of Change**

## **Sunday school lesson for the week of May 16, 2021**

**By Dr. Hal Brady**

**Lesson Scripture: Jeremiah 38:14-23**

**Key Verse: Jeremiah 38:15**

### **Lesson Aims**

4. Explain the context of Jeremiah's ministry in the days of King Zedekiah.
5. Contrast Zedekiah's indecision with Jeremiah's resolve.

It is reported that Katsuhiko Ishibashi, a seismologist and university professor in Japan, for years worried that many of Japan's nuclear power plants were at risk for significant damage from earthquakes. Though he and his colleagues warned about possible catastrophe, they were largely ignored. However, when a magnitude 9.0 earthquake occurred off the northeastern coast of Japan's main island in March 2011, the resulting tsunami caused massive damage to the nuclear power station in Fukushima.

The ensuing radioactive fallout forced some 160,000 people to evacuate their homes across an area of approximately 300 square miles. Additional studies and reports since published vindicated Ishibashi's warnings about possible disaster at the site.

When the nation of Judah faced God's wrath for their numerous violations of the covenant with God, God commissioned Jeremiah to sound the warnings and call them to repentance. Perhaps it was not too late for their faltering nation and their king to avert the disaster and desolation that awaited them.

### **Lesson Context**

The prophet Jeremiah delivered God's message to the nation of Judah from 627 until the mid-580s BC. That was roughly a century after the prophet Isaiah. Five kings reigned over Judah during Jeremiah's ministry. Josiah, the first of these five, was righteous (2 Kings 23:25). The four following him, however, were all wicked. These included Jehoiachin, who was removed from the throne and taken into captivity when the Babylonians invaded in 597 BC (2 Kings 24:12). At that point, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylonia replaced Jehoiachin with that man's uncle, Mattaniah, and renamed him Zedekiah in the process (2 Kings 24:17).

We are informed that Zedekiah wavered between services to the Babylonian king and rebellion against that overlord. Zedekiah ruled for Judah's final decade as a nation before it fell in 586 BC.

The destruction of Judah at the hands of Babylon that Isaiah had foreseen decades earlier (see 2 Kings 20:16-18) drew near during Jeremiah's day. Like the northern kingdom of Israel before, Judah's unfaithfulness to the covenant had exhausted God's great patience. Jeremiah proclaimed that God would use the Babylonians as instruments of judgment against Judah (Jeremiah 20:4-6).

Throughout his prophetic ministry, Jeremiah warned Jerusalem in word and in deed of the coming destruction. He illustrated this message in symbolic actions (examples: Jeremiah 13:1-11; 19:1-15). Yet rarely did anyone take this prophet seriously (Jeremiah 37:2). His oracles were misunderstood and dismissed as the rhetoric of a traitorous, pro-Babylonian sympathizer (Jeremiah 37:11-13).

On the other hand, Jerusalem's more "loyal" prophets proclaimed peace, safety, and deliverance. And even though their fabricated, uninspired message was false, it was believed among the populace.

Two times in Judah's closing months, while Jerusalem was under siege, Jeremiah endured punishments for his message of doom. First, he was beaten and held in a dungeon cell for many days (Jeremiah 37:15,16). Zedekiah, however, summoned him from the dungeon and released him into the courtyard of the guard (37:21). There he continued to reveal the unpleasant things God told him (Jeremiah 38:1-3).

Now, Zedekiah's officials took exception to Jeremiah's preaching because his warnings were understood as treasonous and demoralizing (Jeremiah 38:4). And with Zedekiah's unwillingness to oppose them, the officials had Jeremiah put down into a muddy cistern. But a high official named Ebed-Melek (pronounced Ee-bed-mee-lek) gathered 30 men (also with Zedekiah's concession) to lift Jeremiah out of the mud and rescue him from certain death (Jeremiah 38:8-13).

### **A Secret Meeting Jeremiah 38:14-16**

When the Babylonians returned and besieged Jerusalem and defeat seemed near, Zedekiah began to summon Jeremiah for conversations. It is suggested that "the third entrance to the temple of the Lord" probably indicates a backdoor access from the palace to the temple. Apparently, the king wanted a private setting where he could talk with Jeremiah outside his officials' hearing. It could be that Zedekiah thought that Jeremiah might reverse his oracles of judgment and the Lord would grant Jerusalem a reprieve after all.

As we know, this conversation is not the first such conversation. Zedekiah's repeated summoning of Jeremiah shows that at least part of him respected Jeremiah's advice, if not his standing, as an inspired prophet of God. Yet his terse command to Jeremiah, "Do not hide anything from me," shows that Zedekiah did not yet realize that Jeremiah always told the king everything God told the prophet.

So Zedekiah asked for the full truth! But Jeremiah, mindful of previous experiences of rejection, exacted an oath of protection from the king before he spoke. Undoubtedly, Jeremiah knew that Zedekiah was hoping for a more favorable word from the Lord this time. But the prophet also knew that no favorable word would be forthcoming.

Zedekiah swore a solemn oath that he would neither put Jeremiah to death nor deliver him to his bitter enemies. Zedekiah swore: Jeremiah believed that even a moral weakling like Zedekiah would hold to a sacred oath.

### **A Private Prophecy Jeremiah 38:17-23**

Now, Jeremiah knew that this king would likely waffle on his prophecy, given past behavior (example: Jeremiah 34:8-22). Even so, the prophet still proclaimed the word from God, come what may. The message from God was like a fire in Jeremiah's bones, impossible to hold back whether anyone listened or not (Jeremiah 6:10,11).

Recently, I ran across a paper I had prepared on what I consider the "Qualities of Good Preaching." These were the qualities I mentioned: relevance, personal warmth, clarity, interest, emotion, and urgency. No question, Jeremiah had an urgency about his prophecy. It was like a fire burning inside of him.

Jeremiah's referring to "the Lord God Almighty, the God of Israel," was referring to the true king of Israel. It also has implications for how the people were called to conduct themselves (compare Leviticus 26). However, idolatry and injustice had landed them in a position to face God's punishment. Simply stated, they did not act as people who belonged to God.

In verse 17b, the Lord's offer to spare Zedekiah's life upon surrender to the Babylonians accords with terms previously stated (Jeremiah 21:8-9). God's offer to spare the "city" from her destruction might seem like an astonishing, last-minute reversal (compare Jeremiah 21:10; 34:2, 22: 37:9-10). But God has the freedom to change his mind about either blessing or punishment for a nation that alters its course (Jeremiah 18:5-10). Remember, God did so for Nineveh at the preaching of Jonah (Jonah 3:10). Note here that God did not offer a solution in which Zedekiah was allowed to remain king in Jerusalem. But God did offer a solution that would avoid Jerusalem being "burned down" or Zedekiah's experiencing great personal violence.

The nation of Judah apparently had chances early on to avert disaster entirely (Jeremiah 4:1-4). Yet God eventually was determined unreservedly to punish Judah (4:27,28). Although judgment in Babylon was by this time assured, God still offered mercy to his people and their king (compare 1 Kings 21:20-29). As Jeremiah made clear to Zedekiah, accepting God's mercy even in judgment would lessen some of the horrible consequences that otherwise would follow.

We are reminded that Christians still experience God's discipline tempered by his mercy, even though we don't recognize it as such (1 Corinthians 11:31-32; Hebrews 12:4-11). Yet this is part of the process of God using all things for our good (Romans 8:28). It doesn't mean we will enjoy all things or that "all" things seem good. Instead, "all" things that happen to us and around us are meant to make us into the image of Jesus.

Now, Jeremiah is crystal clear that if Zedekiah does not act properly, he will be handed over to a terrible fate at the hands of the Babylonians and the city will be destroyed by fire and he himself will not escape.

In verse 19, had Zedekiah feared the Babylonians it would be hard to blame him. Even fearing his own officials is understandable since his predecessor Jehoiachin was probably murdered by his own officials the last time the Babylonians invaded (Jeremiah 22:18-19; 36:29-31). Therefore, since some of Jerusalem's citizens had already surrendered to the Babylonians, Zedekiah did not want to expose himself to them for his own safety.

In verse 20, Zedekiah tried to make the issue into a purely political matter, but he was oblivious to the real issue. Jeremiah then directed the king back to the core spiritual realities. Obedience! Obedience to the Lord was Zedekiah's only visible course of action. The promise "your life will be spared" probably referred more to quality of life than mere survival. Indeed, the quality of Zedekiah's life after remaining rebellious to both God and Nebuchadnezzar ended up being quite poor (Jeremiah 52:8-11).

At this point, we look at the consequences of Zedekiah's rebellion (Jeremiah 38:21-23). Jeremiah makes it clear that this preview of the future comes from God. Jeremiah himself has no more control of God's message than a weather forecaster can control over the weather.

Zedekiah's palace would fall if he didn't do as the Lord revealed. This could refer to his family in general, his descendants, or (less likely) the Davidic line.

Jeremiah underscores the violent fate of the women (referring to women of the court, wives, and concubines) and their children: rape and enslavement for the women and likely execution or, at best, enslavement for the royal sons. The children are a clear escalation of Jeremiah's appeal not to Zedekiah's logical side, but to his emotional center. What father would willingly subject his children to seeing their mother "captured and their city burned down?"

The choice before the king is not simply a matter of his own fate. It has ramifications for everyone in his court. That connection is understood by the lament Jeremiah places on the lips of the women being led to their violent fate. The lament of the women takes the form of a taunt song, accusing the king of being enticed by his trusted friends into a mode of conduct that brings about his own downfall.

Yet even hearing the sad fate that awaited his family and court failed to move Zedekiah. He was more concerned about keeping the secret from his officials, maybe even protecting Jeremiah, than about obedience to God or the consequences that awaited him (see Jeremiah 38:24-26, not in our printed text).

For his disobedience, Zedekiah paid a heavy price. His sentence was to see his own sons put to death and then his own eyes be blinded afterward. Jerusalem was burned to the ground and Zedekiah remained in shackles in Babylon till he died.

As we know, Zedekiah's demise came at the hand of God (Jeremiah 34:22; Ezekiel 12:13,14). Even the Babylonians themselves realized it (Jeremiah 40:3). So, such was the fate of one who trusted in human wisdom rather than believing that God's word could and should be trusted (Proverbs 3:5-8).

Hear me now! What we desperately need is God's mind on the serious issues of life and culture. And God offers it to us through the teaching of his word and the inner guidance of his Holy Spirit. Thus, our task is not to think that we know better than God. Dr. Jim Dennison, of the Dennison Forum, stated "Our problem is that we tend to measure God's capacities by ours, assuming we are experiencing all that he is doing." I repeat, our task is not to think that we know better than God.

### **Summary**

Jeremiah was a failure by human standards – accused falsely instead of believed, persecuted by officials, betrayed by family. No one honored or obeyed Jeremiah's words. Even after his predictions about Zedekiah and Jerusalem were fulfilled, Jeremiah continued to be disbelieved.

Yet from the standpoint of faith, the life of Jeremiah was successful by God's standards. He always remained true to his calling, willing to deliver God's word, regardless of the personal cost. And Jeremiah was open to God's leading even through doubts, tears and fears. You see, Jeremiah reminds us that sometimes the purposes of God are not identified with national well-being, and that often leads to trouble. In Jeremiah's life, it did!

As we discover, Jeremiah is a book for today's times. People of faith in our time can expect the world to ignore our message and ridicule our convictions. And we can also expect hostility to flare up in areas where the gospel is proclaimed boldly. Though Christ is with us always (Matthew 28:20), Christian discipleship carries no guarantees of personal comfort or applause. But like Jeremiah, we must learn to see the world as God sees it and remain faithful to our calling. Prayer will be a necessity.

### **Action Plan**

4. Which speaks to you most deeply: the moral courage of Jeremiah or the moral cowardice of Zedekiah?
5. Should consequences for others be the primary factor in your moral choices? Why, or why not?
6. What do you admire most about Jeremiah? Please explain!

## Resources for this lesson

5. “2020-2021 Standard Lesson Commentary, Uniform Series, International Bible Lessons for Christian Teaching,” pages 313-320.
6. “The New Interpreter’s Bible Volume VI” pages 850-853.
7. “Commentary on Jeremiah” by Andrew Blackwood, Jr. pages 259-260.
8. “A Popular Survey of the Old Testament,” by Norman L. Geisler, pages 245-246.

*Dr. Hal Brady is a retired pastor who continues to present the Good News of Jesus Christ and offer encouragement in a fresh and vital way through Hal Brady Ministries ([halbradyministries.com](http://halbradyministries.com)).*

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## 5 lessons we need to carry out of the pandemic

### GROWING IN GRACE

**BEN GOSDEN**

By all expert accounts we seem to be nearing a place where the end of this pandemic is in sight (side note: please keep wearing your masks and get your vaccine if you’re able to get one).

What started as a brief delay in our routine has become a marathon of more than a year. We’ve marked special days in different ways. We’ve lived our daily lives somewhere on the spectrum of fearful to incredibly anxious. And what might be among the hardest for most of us, we’ve seen our rhythms of church life altered in ways we can barely recognize.

While many of us just want to return to “the way things used to be,” I think that is a terrible mistake. Life doesn’t move backwards. It can only move forward. And there are lessons we can take from this past year to make our churches stronger. Here are five:

#### **1. Don’t lose those newly formed online muscles**

By mid-March 2020 we were all frantically working to learn how to utilize the internet to continue being the church. Buildings were closed, we were isolated in quarantine, and the internet was all we had to connect with people. And then we learned an important lesson: the internet is not so much a tool as it is a place. We meet each other there. And we learned how to “see” people and connect with them. Many pastors were over-functioning early on, thinking we had to offer some sort of online connection daily. And that was good for a while – at least it helped us begin to build these new muscles. Over the last year we have learned a lot about how to connect with people online. As we begin to shift our attention back to in-person gatherings, we don’t need to lose these newly formed muscles. These are the muscles that will allow us to expand our ministry beyond our local area. The internet reaches way beyond our building. It’s

now the place where we can continue to learn how to reach people who may never physically encounter our property. Those people need Jesus and the church, too.

## **2. Engagement is WAY more important than attendance**

For too long we've used attendance numbers as a warm blanket to sooth our secret insecurities and measure ourselves against each other. If people showed up to a building, we felt like we did something. Butts in seats are easy to count. Life change is much harder. I remember early on we all focused on multipliers for our online attendance numbers. We were scared and ignorant and boosting those numbers made us feel like we weren't losing anything. Now that a year has gone by we've met the real truth behind our misconception – attendance alone is not a good way to measure the effectiveness of ministry. I hope this past year has taught us that “clicks” and “views” don't mean anything if they don't lead to life change. We need to find ways to measure that more and attendance less. We could begin by reformatting our Discipleship Forms. At the very least I encourage local churches to keep a separate set of numbers – numbers that measure deeper things than just attendance. And make sure you share those with your District Superintendent, too.

## **3. Church is not a building**

We've sung this lesson for years: “The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is a people...” And yet it's hard to shake the notion that church is a building. Just ask a member what they do on Sunday mornings and they'll probably say, “I go to church.” I once read a theologian who corrected that misstatement by saying, “I don't go to church on Sundays. I go to worship so I can BE the church all week long.” This past year taught us that we can be the church even when we can't go to the building. We need to recenter ministry beyond our buildings, take it into our homes and communities, and reimagine what it means to BE the church beyond our physical buildings.

## **4. Reaching new people should be our top goal**

Playing off our earlier lesson about how the internet is a place, not a tool, we can also definitively say that reaching new people should be our top goal. Jesus calls us to the Great Commission, and this past year offered a wonderful opportunity to test the limits of what “and to the ends of the earth” might look like. How can your church better utilize things like social media and livestream worship to reach new people? Maybe you can add an online hospitality component to your hospitality team to imagine ways to reach people online more? The Great Commission remains our calling, and this past year has taught us that the sky is the limit!

## **5. We need to be constant learners**

Learning is hard work. And I feel like we've all worked double hard over the last year learning so many new things. It can be exhausting. And yet we should also remember that the life of

discipleship is spent in the posture of learning. We learn the ways of Jesus and we try to live by them. It's not easy. But that learning shapes and reshapes us in new and amazing ways. This past year has been a laboratory for learning. And it's a good reminder that we as individuals and even we as churches can be more faithful when we commit ourselves to be constant learners.

These are just five lessons I hope we can all take with us into the waning days of this pandemic. This past year has been hard. But two things are true even in the midst of a global pandemic: 1) God is always faithful; and 2) We are called to be the church and, as such, we are called to reach new people in new ways.

*The Rev. Ben Gosden is senior pastor at Trinity United Methodist Church in Savannah. He can be reached at [ben@trinity1848.org](mailto:ben@trinity1848.org).*

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## **The Germans elect a bishop**

### **JOHN WESLEY MOMENTS**

#### **DAVE HANSON**

One of the most thrilling experiences John Wesley had with his German neighbors in Georgia was being present when these Moravian Christians elected a bishop. John Wesley spent a lot of time with these German Christians learning their language, singing, and sharing Christian fellowship.

He watched as the German congregation elected a new bishop. It seemed to him that he had been transported back in history to the early church where fishermen and tentmakers simply prayed and chose their pastoral leader. It was done without the pomp and circumstances of the modern church. It was, for Wesley, a realization of his dream to recapture primitive Christianity out here on the Georgia frontier.

*The Rev. Dave Hanson is a retired pastor and John Wesley scholar.*

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## **Retired Clergy Birthdays – May 2021**

- 5/01 – Jacque Asbel: 4116 Amberley Trail; Valdosta, GA 31602
- 5/01 – John Beck: 1210 Tribble Rd.; Ft. Valley, GA 31030
- 5/03 – Rick Turner: 798 Mallery St., Apt. 11; St. Simons Island, GA 31522
- 5/06 – Eddie Morrison: 1610 Kings Way; Savannah, GA 31406
- 5/11 – Stan Posey: 3936 Island Creek Rd.; Valdosta, GA 31601
- 5/12 – Reese Nelson: 2804 Willow Wood Circle; Valdosta, GA 31602
- 5/12 – Ron Womack: 404 Bobby Ray Rd.; Reidsville, GA 30453
- 5/14 – Donald Clark: 197 Cubbedge Dr.; Rincon, GA 31326
- 5/14 – Marshall Howell: PO Box 658; Midway, GA 31320

5/14 – Kenneth Watkins: 170 Sanford St.; Wadley, GA 30477  
5/15 – Jack McCollough, Jr.: 100 Lindsey Barron Dr., Apt. 232; Newnan, GA 30263  
5/15 – Tommy Roe: PO Box 56; Montrose, GA 31065  
5/15 – Dan Smith: 7176 Standing Boy Rd.; Columbus, GA 31904  
5/19 – Ronnie Howell: 32 Vanceville Co. Line Rd.; Tifton, GA 31794  
5/20 – Franklin Pierce: 602 Ft. King George Dr.; Darien, GA 31305  
5/22 – Jimmy Gilbert: 464 Penia Rd. N; Cordele, GA 31015  
5/23 – Jeri Pruette: 2188 Peacock Rd.; Quitman, GA 31643  
5/26 – Faye Burgamy: 165 S. Burgamy Rd.; Warthen, GA 31094  
5/27 – Cile Mitchell: 130 Hitchiti Ridge Rd.; Juliette, GA 31046  
5/28 – Richard Newton: 1823 Kaufman Circle; Lady Lake, FL 32159  
5/29 – Marsha Emery: 3855 Dennis Creek Road; Talbotton, GA 31827  
5/30 – Luanne Kemper: 1412 Sapling Dr.; Orange Park, FL 32073

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## **Scripture Readings – May 4**

### **May 9**

#### ***Sixth Sunday of Easter***

Acts 10:44-48

Psalm 98 (UMH 818)

1 John 5:1-6

John 15:9-17

### **May 16**

#### ***Seventh Sunday of Easter***

Acts 1:1-11

Psalm 47 (UMH 781)

Ephesians 1:15-23

Luke 24:44-53

### **May 23**

#### ***Pentecost***

Acts 2:1-21

Psalm 104:24-34, 35b (UMH 826)

Romans 8:22-27

John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

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## **Events in the South Georgia Conference – 5/4/2021 edition**

### **Online Advanced Lay Servant Ministries Training via Zoom – May 4, May 6, May 11, May 13**

Lay Servant training is designed to educate those persons interested in stretching their faith to participate more fully in the ministries of the church. They have three main areas of focus:

Leading, Caring, and Communicating. The advanced class, based on Cokesbury's book, "Each One a Minister," by William Carter, is a study of the book of Ephesians and what it teaches us about how we are called to use our spiritual gifts. You must complete all of the scheduled dates to complete your training. To participate you will need either a cell phone that will allow you to download the Zoom app (please do so ahead of time) or a laptop, a steady wi-fi connection, and a willingness to learn in a modern way. Note: Basic Lay Servant class must be completed before taking Advanced Class. Registration fee for the class is \$25. For more information, contact Anne Bosarge at [anne@thechapelministries.com](mailto:anne@thechapelministries.com).

### **Magnolia Manor Sunday – May 9**

Magnolia Manor is a South Georgia Conference ministry that serves older adults of all faiths in eight locations throughout South Georgia. On this Special Sunday, South Georgia United Methodists are asked to take up a special offering to support this vital ministry. To learn more about Magnolia Manor visit [www.magnoliamanor.com](http://www.magnoliamanor.com).

### **Alive Together at the Table with Bishop Bryan, Zoom – May 11**

Come together at the table with Bishop Bryan for reflections and conversations. How is it with your soul? What is going on in our conference and the general church you need to know? The conversation will begin at noon and will last approximately one hour. We will use the same Zoom link for all of these conversations, so once you register and receive the Zoom link you can save it for future conversations. If you misplace the link at any point, feel free to register again. [Register now](#)

### **ERT & Chainsaw Training, Byron – May 22**

Early Response Team (ERT) Trainings equip individuals and teams to respond in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. The cost for the training is \$25 per participant. At the training, participants will receive an ERT Training Manual and upon completing the course will receive an UMCOR ID Badge and a conference ERT T-shirt, and lunch is included. You must be 18 years or older to get the UMCOR badge. An UMCOR background check is required before receiving badges—participants must register online (at no cost to participants). Contact your Lead Instructor if you need the Verified Volunteer Good Deed Code. This ERT and Chainsaw Training will be held May 22 at Harvest Church in Byron. ERT Training begins at 8 a.m. For Chainsaw Training details, please contact Rob Belknap. [Register here](#). For questions, contact Rob Belknap, North Central District Disaster Coordinator: [RWBelknap@cox.net](mailto:RWBelknap@cox.net).

### **Peace with Justice Sunday – May 30**

Peace with Justice Sunday enables The United Methodist Church to have a voice in advocating for peace and justice through a broad spectrum of global programs. [Peace with Justice Sunday Pastor and Leader Kit](#)