



2021 Lenten Small Group Study

Faith Lutheran Church | Topeka KS

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A supplement to the CPH Daily Devotions by Erik J. Rottmann

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Small Group Study Introduction

Our Lenten theme for 2021 is "Return to the Lord your God" from Joel 2:13. Speaking through His prophet Joel, God called His people during a time of national calamity to turn away from their sinful lives and to return to Him so that their lives would be blessed by His mercy and grace. May God's call of return echo in our ears and in our hearts each week of Lent. This call should prompt us to consider how our current cultural and national struggles impact all people of faith in hearing this call today. Specifically, what are those things that can get in the way of returning to God? Even when we hear the call and the desire to return is rekindled in us, there will be stumbling blocks to face, some of them from ourselves.

This Lenten small group study will encourage you to dive deeper into God's Holy Word and consider the difficulties experienced by those in the biblical narratives and to apply the lessons learned from their stories to our own lives. The study's focus will be upon understanding those difficulties, their effect, and their use by God in drawing the people closer to Him. The study will bring you the comfort of God's Word that His desire is always to be our God and is always for us to be His people (Jeremiah 31:33).

This Lenten theme and the accompanying Bible study is particularly suited to our time and situation. Most would have no trouble calling this last year a "national calamity." The world has and continues to suffer under a pandemic. It all began last year not much before Holy Week which was unlike anything we had ever experienced. And not just then but in the months that followed, the Church has proclaimed the message of repentance and grace as its response to the pandemic. For It was, and it continues to be a time when we hear God clearly calling to us, "Return to the Lord your God." Throughout the ages of Scriptures, God time and time again calls His people back to Him.

It will be interesting, and perhaps also challenging, for us to look back at the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020 and to reflect upon our circumstances now in 2021, seeing ourselves in the place of the biblical people we will be studying. How did we accept the news and concerns at first? Where and to whom did we look for hope and comfort as predictions grew more dire? How did we handle things when we couldn't really understand what was happening? Has it and have the challenges and complications from it caused us to draw farther away from God or to "return to the Lord our God"? How do we as a people of faith respond to our Lord's call today and every tomorrow after it?

We will explore God's Word as we reflect upon questions like these and many others. The study is intended to last six weeks beginning with the week of Ash Wednesday and concluding just before Holy Week. The material includes a shorter personal study for individual use during Holy Week. The themes for the six weeks of group study are: A Call to Return; Prayer; Betrayal; False Witness; Denial; and The Kingdom of God. The individual Holy Week study is entitled, The Resurrection and You: Come and See. This initial study guide includes the first five weeks of the study. Look for an announcement upon the release of the study guides for the sixth and seventh weeks.

There is a daily devotional that accompanies this year's Lenten theme. While we encourage your use of it, the messages there do not necessarily follow the small group study guide. To encourage your reading of the daily devotions, the study guide will refer to a daily devotion by date and/or page number in a few instances.

May this study, our time in His Word, and our Lenten worship and devotion strengthen our faith to hear and heed His call to, "return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Joel 2:13).

-Pastor Martin Albrecht

WEEK 1 . Return to the Lord



OPENING ... Joel 1:1-20; 2:11-17

Each lesson will begin with a reading of Joel 2:13 and a prayer specific to the theme of the study for that week, keeping with the theme, "Return to the Lord" ...

**Return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.**

Prayer: Gracious heavenly Father, You desire to draw Your people back to You through repentance. Help us to acknowledge our sinfulness in thought, word, and deed; what we have done and what we have left undone. In faith, let us see the love that You have for us all in the sending of Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, to be our Savior from sin. Lead us by Your Spirit to desire to know and do Your will, to walk in Your ways that You may be glorified. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

Was it an actual plague of locusts or just a metaphor for a military invasion? The book of Joel is not dated back to the time of Moses in Egypt, although the reference to locusts may have you thinking about one of the plagues. Because it lacks references to any kings and because locust plagues were relatively common in Joel's part of the world, scholars do not know exactly when this book was written or the details of this historical situation.

As there are no references to a northern kingdom or to any common enemies, the leading thought is sometime after the Babylonian conquest and during the Second Temple period, so sometime between 515 and 400 BC. This lack of historical specifics suggests the book was composed more for liturgical use, that is, to have relevance for any time and place. Nothing more is really known about Joel than that his name means, "Yahweh is God," and he's the son of Pethuel.

The opening verses of Joel 1 have you hear God's prophet Joel describe the devastation that has come upon the people. Words given to Joel by God. Words intended to provoke the people into listening. Words capturing the imagination even today. This will be followed by a call to bring the people to repentance and return to their loving heavenly Father. God spoke to His people so that they would be reminded of His character. He spoke to them as the One who wanted to be their God and they His covenant people. The almighty and merciful Lord says to them (and to us): "Return to the LORD your God. For He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."

Q & A

Transition: The liturgy of Ash Wednesday draws us to humble ourselves in repentance by reflecting on what separates us from God. We come into the presence of God realizing that "[we] are dust and to dust [we] shall return" (Genesis 3:19). These words remind us that death came with sin/disobedience and that death was never part of God's original creation. The pastor speaks these words as he places ashes upon your forehead in the shape of a cross. In so doing, you are reminded of God's love that did not write us off but sent His only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who suffered and died that we would have forgiveness of sins. Our God who hates sin is also "slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."

Through the prophet Joel, God called His people to turn from sinful ways and to return to Him for grace and blessings. The images described are so vivid and disturbing as to impress each succeeding generation of just how dire and desperate our own situations can become and how our needs deserve immediate attention in

listening and responding to God's call for returning to faithfulness. Thus, "return to the Lord, your God," is not just a liturgical verse, but the cry of our hearts as we walk the path of Lent this year. As you start this study, discuss the following. Do you find this message of "return to the Lord" different this Lent? More compelling or less? More comforting or unsettling or both?

Q1. Read Joel 1 aloud and then discuss. What was going on in Joel's time that led God to speak to His people through this prophet?

God describes in graphic detail the results of a plague of locusts (1:4). "Cutting" "Swarming" "Hopping" "Destroying" are among the adjectives used to describe four kinds of locusts. Scripture often cites four agents indicating utter destruction. See Ezekiel 14:21; Jeremiah 15:1-3. How does this detail help in understanding the opening instructions in verses 2 and 3? Why?

After describing this pestilence, God speaks to how the people should respond. Identify and discuss the different responses (vv. 5, 8-9, 11, 13, 14, 19). Compare and contrast those responses with how we express repentance today?

Verse 15 refers to the "day of the Lord." What does it mean here? Who is coming and to do what?

See "day of the Lord" references in 2:1 and 2:11. At 2:11, the coming of the day of the Lord is said to be "great and very awesome; who can endure it"? Do you see both destruction/chaos/judgment and rescue/refuge/salvation in this reference and theme to the "Day of the Lord"? Who can endure it?

 *Transition:* After describing in graphic detail the destruction that was brought in the past and the frightening but awesome day of the Lord that is still to come, the Lord God speaks through Joel to His people about the present: "Yet even now ... " Joel 2:12

Q2. What is the Lord asking the people to do in 2:12-17?

"[W]ith all your heart" in verse 12 reveals what?

On what does repentance rest in verse 13? On you or God?

How do these same verses apply to us today?

What continues to be the disease/plague/invasion that separates us from God?

God's call to return is for us today. And while the methods and practices of repentance may have changed, God still desires our whole hearts. He desires to wash them clean and make them new. After all, we and our hearts belong to God, who created us all.

Transition: The words, "Return to the Lord your God," both admonish and encourage us to do just that. This has been true for all God's people of all times.

Q3. At Joel 2:14, the prophet seems ambiguous but hopeful that God may relent of the destruction. If God does not relent, does this mean that God is not a God of blessing?

In answering this, we understand disasters come to work repentance so that the real disaster of our eternal separation from God may be averted. Discuss Martin Chemnitz's statement: "In the area of temporal punishments we must humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God and let God be free either to punish or withhold punishment, totally or in part."

As the Creator and sustainer of all things, God most certainly can both destroy and bless. It is likely that Joel's expectation was for God in His mercy not only to deliver them but also to provide all that they "need to support this body and life," and to protect them from further evil or disaster (Small Catechism, Explanation of the First Article). How does Philippians 4:11-13 help in understanding this?

Scripture fully reveals that our just God did relent (show grace) in punishing us for our sin, as the punishment was borne by his only Son for us. Read 2 Corinthians 5:21. Review Daily Devotion Wednesday, Lent 1, p. 12

Transition: The words of the prophet now move from motivating the people to repent and turn back to God to encouraging them to live new lives, walk in God's way, and worship Him.

Q4. How were the people asked to prepare for worship? See Joel 2:15-17.

A pivotal point occurs at verse 17 with the command to the priests to intercede.

Who is our "high priest" who makes intercession for us? Hebrews 7:25; Luke 23:24; Romans 8:34.

What is our answer to Joel's query, "Who can endure the awesome day of the Lord?"

Verse 17 ends with asking why the people's lives do not evidence what the Lord has done for them.

What comfort do you receive from the Daily Devotion for Friday, Lent 1, p. 14? Our Christian lives are to reflect thankfulness for God's love and provisions for us. Read Psalm 118:1.

CONCLUSION

Like the locust plague that the people in Joel's time experienced, COVID-19 threatened our nation and even the world for almost a year now. It has sent a scare around the globe. Our lives and our livelihoods have been threatened. As you have experienced these, did you make a connection to the call expressed in Joel 2:13? Have you heard God calling you to Return to Him during these experiences? If so, how have you heeded the calls?

In the end, God heard the prayers of His people and showed His mercy by sending grain, wine, and olive oil. God promised, "You will be satisfied" (2:19). God also assured His people that He would no longer make them a reproach among the other nations. Do you have stories of God's grace during the pandemic that have "satisfied," restored, and/or kept you in the faith?

CLOSING

Prayer: Almighty God, lead us to repentance of all our sins of thought, word, and deed; what we have done and what we have left undone. You have blessed us by the sending of Your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Help us always to hear You calling us back to return to You in faith toward You, love toward one another, and obedience to Your holy will for our new lives in Christ Jesus. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

WEEK 2 . Return to Prayer



OPENING ... Matthew 26:36-44

Read Joel 2:13 together...

**Return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.**

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, You have taught Your disciples and us how to pray in faith. Help us in all times and in any circumstances to turn to our Father in prayer as You have always done. Grant that we submit to the Father's will in what we think, say, and do, that all glory may be given to our triune God alone. In Your name we pray. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

The season of Lent is marked not only by self-examination and repentance but by prayer. There is no question but that communication is the lifeblood of all relationships. Scripture shows us our Lord God made his creation to be in relationship with Him and with each other. Thus, we know that God also is blessing us with different ways of communicating with one another and with being able to communicate with Him, man to God, child to Father. He also has blessed us with the certain faith that He is listening. Sometimes we let our holy conversations with Him be sidetracked by other priorities and distractions. In this study, we will look specifically at the importance of prayer, using Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane as our point of reference. We will also look at the relationship that He has with the Father. May this Lent be our return to faithful prayer treasuring our time with Him, lifting up our prayers without ceasing, and seeking mercy from Him who hears our every petition and responds in love.

Q & A

Transition: Prayer is an essential part of our relationship with God. God desires us to have regular communication with Him. Jesus is the supreme example of obedience to the Father and communication with Him in prayer. We are told throughout the Gospels of Jesus going off by Himself to pray. We also need that kind of time with our Father in heaven. We may not know what to say, and sometimes just having a silent time alone with God and being in His presence is all that we need. Our loving Father enjoys it when we spend time with Him and talk to Him about anything and everything, the good and the bad, even the ugly things of life. He wants to hear it all because He wants a close and lasting relationship with us. He wants all of us.

As we embark on this week's study, discuss these general questions. How would you describe your prayer life? Many of us probably don't think we're good at prayer. We can be critical of ourselves judging our words as inadequate and maybe even hollow. We may think our reasons for praying seem self-centered and trivial. And so, we are left with questioning whether our prayer life measures up. When such thoughts occupy us, we find hope in knowing we are never alone when we pray.

Q1. Read Matthew 26:36-44. What do you think are likely reasons for Jesus taking Peter, James and John (his inner circle of disciples) farther into the garden with Him? Read Matthew 17:1 (eyewitnesses to glory)... there for support? to be eyewitnesses to agony and humiliation? to learn?

Discuss what Jesus, true man and true God, is revealing as his sorrowful and troubled condition here? Is this revelation transparent and open? What does that mean for our prayer life? What may be some reasons we struggle with being open and direct in our prayer?

Besides Jesus' words, what else in this narrative reveals his human agony? Look at verse 39. How do we as a church and as individuals use physical posturing for prayer to show worship, respect, and humility? Have you found physical posturing and movement helpful in your prayer life?

The incarnate Word is the Suffering Servant, the Christ, and the Son of the living God. He fell with His face to the ground and prayed. His words of anguish and his personal human suffering reveal Christ understood what He would be carrying to the cross and what He had to do to perfectly obey His Father's will.

Transition: In tracking what is happening in this narrative, we need to discuss what is God's will? This needs to be broken into two parts.

Q2. First, what is God's ultimate will for all people as His creation? Read 1 Timothy 2:3-4.

Second, what is God's will for Jesus Christ, His only Son? Read 1 Timothy 2:5-6. God's will is for His plan of salvation to be carried out by the man, Christ Jesus, to be the perfect sacrifice—"the ransom for all."

How would you describe God's will for your prayers? 1 Thessalonians 5:17-19

Transition: The law serves as a mirror in pointing out our frequent failures to obey God's instructions. Jesus first instructs eight of the disciples and later instructs Peter, James, and John. How is their failure to keep Jesus' instructions a good example of the human condition described in Romans 7:13-19? What is this saying to you and your own struggles with keeping up a prayer life?

Our own spiritual weakness can deter us from calling on God in prayer. We may imagine that God could not possibly listen to the prayers of a sinner like me or that I need to get my "life straightened out" first so my prayers will be heard. It is a delusion to think the Lord only hears the prayers of those who have pure hearts. There are no works or preconditions before God will graciously hear the prayers of believers. If we really had to have pure hearts, would we have a reason to pray? True Christian living includes truthfully confessing our sins and weaknesses. Instead of defending ourselves against the law, we admit its accusation that we are mired in sin and are only able to cry out, "Have mercy on me, O God!" God invites us to approach Him on Christ's merits, not our own.

Q3. Looking at what Jesus says to the three disciples, what meaning should be given to the word "watch" in this setting? Are they to be on guard for particular dangers or just to be vigilant? Based on Jesus' exchange with Peter at Matthew 26: vv. 30-35, do you think that they understood the danger and/or overestimated their strength?

Read verse 41 aloud. Does this warning extend to us today? Read and discuss 1 Peter 4:7. Do we live and pray in the expectation that we could meet Jesus at any moment either by His return or our death? How should that expectation shape our prayer life?

Sin and temptation turn us inwardly keeping us from turning our attention to God in prayer. Have you found this to be true when you have had dry spells in your prayer life?

When His barber asked him for instruction on praying, Martin Luther wrote him a letter that opened with this: "I'll do my best to show you how I approach prayer. May our Lord God help us all to do better in this regard. Amen. First, sometimes I feel I am becoming cold and apathetic about prayer. This is usually because of all the

things that are distracting me and filling my mind. I know this is a result of the flesh and the devil always waging war against me, trying to prevent me from praying. When this happens, I like to take my little book of the Psalms and sneak away into a little room, or if the right time or day, I like to go to church with other people." [Martin Luther, *A Simple Way to Pray*]

Transition: Repetition. There is repetition in Jesus' prayer-showing His dedication and obedience; there is repetition in Jesus' leaving-something that He had been preparing His disciples for; there is also repetition in Jesus finding the disciples asleep. We are to pray "without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17 and Luke 11:8-9); and pray "at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance" (Ephesians 6:18; see also Philippians 4:4-7; and Colossians 4:2). These passages give us even greater insight about what Jesus was asking of the three disciples that night as well as what Jesus asks of us as we pray and wait with anticipation.

Q4. The prayer of Jesus is almost the same each time. Three times the Son addresses the Father, asking God to take the cup (of suffering/of sin/of death) away from Him. Three times He prays, "Not My will, but Yours be done." What are we to learn from how and what Jesus prays?

This illustrates the saying that prayer changes things. It doesn't change God, but it does change us. In his state of humiliation, Christ refrained from using his divine powers for his own benefit. In the first prayer, Jesus asks, "if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." In the second prayer, Jesus asks a little differently, "if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." And after the third prayer, Jesus with grim determination says to the disciples, "Rise, let us be going."

Jesus' prayers in Gethsemane demonstrate what it means to pray the Third Petition of the Lord's Prayer: Lord, bring my will into perfect harmony with your good and gracious will. Jesus never stopped wanting the redemption of the world, and he was willing to endure all the agony and rejection if there was no other way. Jesus never considered the price too high to save His own. If there was no other way as the Father assured him in prayer, then this would be a source of strength to Jesus as he went to the cross.

How have you experienced prayer as bringing about change and obedience to God's will? Discuss John 15:7; Matthew 21:22; and Daily Devotion on Saturday, Lent 2, p. 23.

CONCLUSION

The events of the Gethsemane narrative are full of unexpected human physical manifestations- the drops of bloody sweat, the disciples falling asleep repeatedly, and Jesus being sorrowful to the point of death. We are seeing a fully human Jesus showing the weakness of humanity but remaining without sin. We also witness Him showing a strength that we do not have in and of ourselves, but in Him we have the same Spirit that cries, "Abba, Father." And in the end, we truly learn from Jesus Christ to pray. Return to the Lord in prayer. If time permits, the group can discuss in the context of this past year the importance they placed on prayer and anything special about their prayer life.

CLOSING

Catechesis: Review Third Petition of the Lord's Prayer and its meaning found in Luther's Small Catechism: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." What does this mean? The good and gracious will of God is done even without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may be done among us also.

How is God's will done? God's will is done when He breaks and hinders every evil plan and purpose of the Devil, the world, and our sinful nature, which do not want us to hallow God's name or let His kingdom come; and when He strengthens and keeps us firm in His Word and faith until we die. This is His good and gracious will.

Pray: The Lord's Prayer

WEEK 3 . Return from Betrayal



OPENING ... Matthew 26:14-25, 44-56. John 13:21-30

Read Joel 2:13 together...

**Return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.**

Prayer: Gracious Lord, as part of Your suffering, You knew that one of Your own, Judas Iscariot, would betray You into the hands of sinners, bringing the hour of Your suffering and our salvation to fulfillment of the Father's will. You have shown us the Father's love in that while we were still sinners, You died on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. Create in us clean hearts and renew a right spirit within us. Draw us ever closer to You that we may dwell in Your presence the remainder of our days and unto eternal life with You. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

Judas ... the name has become synonymous with betrayal. Jesus, who had chosen Judas as one of the twelve disciples, referred to Judas as "a devil" (John 6:70-71). In His High Priestly Prayer, Jesus called Judas "the son of perdition" (John 17:12 KJV). Though Judas, when he saw that Jesus was condemned to die, felt remorse, it still had been said of him by Jesus, "The Son of Man goes as it is written of Him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born" (Matthew 26:24).

Q & A

Transition: The abandonment or violation of trust by someone close to you, betrayal can be one of our most painful human experiences. There are many ways it can happen: abandonment, adultery; breaking a promise; revealing secrets; putting another in a false light; and even gossiping and lying. The pain felt from betrayal can be intense and all the more so the closer the betrayer is to you. Since we may not see it coming, it often feels like a sucker-punch to the gut. Betrayal robs us of a security once given to someone who now has proven to be untrustworthy. Betrayal breaks the trust built in a relationship. This can make forgiveness hard and reconciliation even harder. Not dealing with the pain of betrayal can jeopardize our ability to trust again, can tempt us to become a betrayer in retaliation or self-defense, and can lead us to isolation or to becoming emotional numb.

Q1. Read Luke 22:3-6; 21-23; John 13:21-30. Jesus was not immune to betrayal. One of the twelve closest to him, one who was sharing a meal with him, and the very one who was entrusted with the group's finances would betray Jesus--turn him over to authorities—for money. What parts of this story show why betrayal is so painful in human experience? Do you think it troubled Jesus? (John 13:21).

Read Matthew 26:14-25. Does betrayal only harm the victim? Aesop is often quoted as having said, "Betray a friend, and you will often find you have ruined yourself." Does Proverbs 19:5 say something similar? Imagine you were a disciple in the Upper Room when Jesus said, "One of you will betray Me." What would you be thinking and feeling, as you asked, "Is it I, Lord?"

Transition: Under our legal system, culpability is determined by looking at different factors including intent, degree of planning, and kind of motive.

- Q2.** From the gospel accounts already read, evaluate Judas's betrayal based on intent, planning and motive? If it helps imagine you were reporting on this story, how would you answer the usual questions: the who, what, when, where, why, and how of Judas's betrayal of Jesus?

In reflecting on this, is your conscience aroused at how our propensity to sin can lead us to betray others or betray Jesus? Is it betrayal of Jesus when we deny or repudiate our faith to save face or win financial gain?

- Q3.** What do the gospel accounts lead you to believe about Jesus knowing from the beginning that Judas would betray Him to the authorities? Read John 6:70-71. Sometimes we can leap from what is revealed about Jesus' divine nature and about what is prophesied in Scripture into thinking that a person, like Judas, really had no choice. That somehow, God preordained Judas into betraying Jesus and, therefore, Judas is not really that culpable. A closer look at Judas's actions, choices, and conspiratorial efforts should keep us from thinking he was an unfortunate, innocent pawn. Instead, Scripture reveals that Satan entered Judas (Luke 22:3), and Satan is a motivator. Judas still had to act on the temptations put before him. "The devil made me do it" is not an excuse that anyone can hide behind. The story of Judas reminds us there are no temptations or motives so great as to justify our betrayal of Jesus or to justify not feeling shame for our sin. We always know the difference between right and wrong, and Satan will try to seduce us by making evil appear good or justifiable. See 2 Cor. 11:14-25. Instead, our only justification comes from Jesus who was put to shame, betrayed, and exposed for our sake. Read Daily Devotion for Tuesday Lent 3, p. 27.

Transition: The Bible records Jesus' visiting the Mount of Olives three times in the last week of His earthly life. The first visit was his triumphal entry. Luke 19:29-30. The donkey was found on the east side and "[a]s he was drawing near—already on the way down the Mount of Olives—the whole multitude of his disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen, saying 'Blessed is the King who comes in the name of Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!'" Luke 19:37-38.

- Q4.** The second visit happened on Tuesday of Holy Week when Jesus gave what is known as the Olivet Discourse. Jesus spoke about the end of the age and his second coming. Matthew 24:3. Jesus' third visit during the week of His passion was on the night He was betrayed. That evening began with the Last Supper in Jerusalem and ended in the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives. The night that Jesus was betrayed by Judas, what other events took place on the Mount of Olives? Read Mark 14:26-42.

Forty days after he rose from the dead, Jesus led His disciples as far as Bethany on the Mount of Olives. There He ascended into heaven, and afterward the disciples worshiped Him and returned to Jerusalem from Olivet. Read Luke 24:50-53. Immediately following Jesus' ascension, two angels told the disciples on the Mount of Olives that "this Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." Acts 1:11. What messages of "returning" do you find in these visits, events, and passages?

Transition: Jesus knows everything that would happen to Him. In fact, He had talked to His disciples increasingly about these things. There are many connections to be made in the words and the events of that awesome and terrible night.

- Q5.** What does this say about Jesus' obedience and submission by coming forward toward Judas and the officers bearing lanterns and torches and weapons (John 18:3-6)?

Why did Jesus ask the question, "Whom do you seek?" Does this question remind you of what the Father asked in the garden, "Where are you?" Genesis 3:9. What value do you see in the asking of this rhetorical question? Discuss Philippians 2:10-11 as a response and what it means. What does this teach as to considering how our own actions can amount to a betrayal of Jesus? His Lordship? Loving your neighbors? See Philippians 2:3. Discipling others? See Matthew 28:19.

Q6. After Peter and John heal a lame beggar, a crowd gathers in amazement, but Peter takes the opportunity to deliver a sharp message. Acts 3:14-19. "You denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and you killed the Author of Life." Peter calls them out for betraying Jesus, even if done in ignorance, and even if this was prophesied. But Peter also calls them to what? Acts 3:19-20.

CONCLUSION

Much is made in the four Gospel accounts about Judas. More is written of him by Luke in Acts 1. Betrayal is one of the more sinister acts that a human being can perpetrate because it involves breaking the trust of someone close to gain something. The account of Jesus being betrayed by Judas is evocative of Joseph being betrayed by his brothers in Genesis 37 and, after everything, how Joseph responds to them. The words "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Genesis 50:20) have a Christological component, which looks forward to Judas's evil deed of greed and Jesus dying to win salvation for all. Return from betrayal to the Lord.

This past year you've probably heard the word, "trust," thrown around more than most years. To the point maybe, that you're feeling betrayed particularly by all the doublespeak and politicizing of so many issues related to the pandemic, shutdown, and masking. Feelings of betrayal can rob us of the security that comes with believing and trusting. Betrayal can leave us numb with pain and anger. Have you noticed this past year any feelings of betrayal or dealt with things over which you could have felt betrayal?

An editor from World Magazine opened her blog on January 27 with this: "I have this quote from Martin Luther posted above my desk: 'I dare not trust something just because a respected man said it.' Luther did not mean we should dismiss people who have proven themselves trustworthy. Instead, we judge the claims of even the most upright men by whether they agree with Scripture." Do you agree with this as a litmus test for Christians in dealing with the world?

Most importantly, just as Jesus knew about Judas's betrayal, he knew all the ways each of us would betray him and knew the solution was his, "Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?" John 18:11. Even when we fail to be true to Him or when we fail to forgive as he has forgiven us, the Gospel calls us to return for we have been washed in the blood of the lamb and our faith is strengthened in His Holy Meal and in His forgiving and life-giving Word. Read and discuss Ephesians 4:32.

Martin Luther in his *Large Catechism* taught: "Just as we daily sin much against God, and yet He forgives everything through grace, so we, too, must ever forgive our neighbor, who does us injury, violence, and wrong, shows malice toward us, and so on. If, therefore, you do not forgive, then do not think that God forgives you." We do not earn forgiveness by forgiving others, but if we stubbornly refuse to forgive others, then we are rejecting God's forgiveness for them and for us.

CLOSING

Catechesis: Review Fifth Petition and Meaning: "And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." What does this mean? We pray in this petition that our Father in heaven would not look at our sins, or deny our prayer because of them. We are neither worthy of the things for which we pray, nor have we deserved them, but we ask that He would give them all to us by grace, for we daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment. So we too will sincerely forgive and gladly do good to those who sin against us.

Pray: The Lord's Prayer

WEEK 4 . Return from False Witness | Blasphemy



OPENING ... Matthew 26:57-68

Read Joel 2:13 together...

**Return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.**

Prayer: Precious Savior, as You endured that mockery of a trial, with slander and conjecture and false accusations being thrown at You as You were struck and spat upon, You have shown us how to turn the other cheek. Help us learn to do the same when others revile us and say all kinds of false things about us, that our own words and actions may not be in vengeance toward others but may show others the love that You have for all of us through patience and forgiveness and mercy. In Your holy name we pray. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

Blasphemy ... just one of the things the chief priests and teachers of the law were trying to catch Jesus doing so they have Him put to death. Blasphemy is words or actions that show disrespect for God. Sometimes people can become so blinded with hatred, as did the religious leaders in Jerusalem toward Jesus, that it is effortless to break the Eighth Commandment ("You shall not give false witness against your neighbor."). Then as sin is prone to do in us, they attempt to justify their words and actions. And in doing so, they magnify the blasphemy or exaggerate the lie. We've seen this played out frequently on today's political stages, and we know what can come from it--serious damage to reputation or even its ruin. All this too is part of the scene of Jesus' so-called "trial" before Caiaphas, the high priest, and other temple leaders.

Q & A

Transition: A kangaroo court refers to sham legal proceedings meant only to give the impression of a fair legal process. Principles of law and justice and the procedures used to protect them are disregarded or twisted to achieve another end. Jesus' trial fits the bill. Some preparations obviously had been made to arrest, try, convict and execute Jesus before the city awoke. From what they had seen happen on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday, the religious leaders of the Sanhedrin Council were fearful of how the full city would respond if it heard what was happening. Read Matthew 26:3-5. The cooperation of Judas, however, must have surprised them, as things were happening so quickly that the Council looks unprepared.

The gospel of John speaks of Jesus being taken first to the home of former high priest Annas to be examined. This bought the leaders some time to assemble at the home of Caiaphas, the current high priest and son of law of Annas. Even with this extra time, the leaders look to be scrambling to find "false testimony" on which to indict Jesus. Of course, there are many irregularities, if not illegalities, with the proceedings following the arrest. The illegality of place and time are often pointed out, as trials were to be in public places where witnesses could be found and were not to be conducted at night when witnesses were unavailable. Not only before these Jewish leaders, but throughout the Passion, the innocence of Jesus is remarkably clear. And yet, he is tried before the Jewish court and is found guilty of "blasphemy." And through it all, Jesus remains passive, willing to accept the injustices for what will come. As you work through this study, reflect upon those times in your life when you've felt compelled to say or act in defense against false statements, accusations, or impressions. What did you regard as most important to you in those times? To whom did you look for help?

Q1. Read Matthew 26:57-68. What charges are the chief priests seeking to levy against Jesus? (v. 59)

What could be some reasons that they wanted to maintain a semblance of legal proceedings?

At the same time, what could be some reasons that they were eager to dispose of this case against Jesus? (John 18:14)

How does it strike you that the Sanhedrin acted both as judge and prosecutor (looking for “false testimony”)?

How did they know that the testimony/evidence they intended to offer would be false? What does this say about what they expected the truthful evidence would be?

Keeping in mind the passage from John 18:14, do we sometimes delude ourselves that there can be “good” in spreading rumors or in rushing to judgment? And how has that turned out for you? For our country?

Transition: Interestingly enough, the religious leaders cannot find Jesus guilty of blasphemy or false witness even though many false witnesses come forward against Jesus. Read Deuteronomy 19:15 to understand the point here. And because they wanted Jesus put to death, Deuteronomy 17:6 also required what?

Q2. Of the false witnesses against Jesus, there are only two whose words are recorded in Scripture. What did they say? Read Matthew 26:61.

Did Jesus really say that he would destroy the temple? See John 2:18. What did Jesus really mean in making that statement? Read John 2:19-22.

Transition: The gospel of Mark tells us that even these two witnesses did not agree on what Jesus said. See Mark 14:58-59. So what was the Sanhedrin to do, as their strategy to produce false testimony had failed? It's here that the crafty Caiaphas takes front stage. While knowing the witnesses had testified falsely, Caiaphas indignantly asks Jesus questions which could be understood as asking, “Haven't you listened to what these two witnesses just testified? What they heard you say is a terrible offense. It is the utmost blasphemy to speak of destroying God's temple as you did. Do you consider what you said to be of so little importance that you have no answer to these charges?”

Q3. Were Caiaphas's questions fair if the testimony of the two men had not been accepted as sufficient evidence?

How does this add to your understanding of Isaiah 53:7?

Some have called the silence of Jesus in these circumstances, “majestic and holy,” how so? Imagine if you were sitting on the Sanhedrin, what would you have thought?

For believers in Christ, what does the silence of Jesus assure us? Read Hebrews 7:26.

Transition: When that strategy failed, Caiaphas took to exploiting Jesus' silence by turning Jesus into a witness against Himself. Brushing aside all the false testimony and false witnesses, Caiaphas works to extract some statement from Jesus that will be enough for the Sanhedrin to agree on condemning Jesus to death. And so Caiaphas demands, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." (Matthew 26:63).

Q4. Compare Caiaphas's administered oath to Jesus with what Peter confesses at Matthew 16:16?

So how is Caiaphas using "living God" in the oath?

But in doing so, Caiaphas is unwittingly pointing to what truth about Jesus?

Caiaphas's question goes to the heart of the leaders' hatred against Jesus. It was political in part, because Jesus was a dangerous threat to their political power and prestige. But more so religious in that Jesus was claiming to be the Messiah and the Son of God in a way they did not want. Jesus had repeatedly rejected them and their claims of self-made righteousness/works righteousness. He had called them children of the devil and branded them hypocrites.

And so, after denouncing and discrediting their teachings and practices, Jesus was standing before these leaders who were filled with the conceit of self-righteousness. They wanted none of his brand of religion in which he would be a Messiah coming to save them from sin without acknowledging their righteousness and rewarding them for it. Understanding this as being behind the Jewish hostility helps us to realize how we are involved here. For by nature, everyone is inclined toward work-righteousness. We are bent toward such favorable thinking of ourselves as self-worthy and deserving of salvation. We are tempted to put our ways above God's. Review and discuss the Daily Devotion on page 29. Think of a way we blaspheme God in lives.

Q5. In his answer to Caiaphas, what is Jesus confessing? Matthew 26:64

How does this compare with what Jesus later confesses to Pilate? Matthew 27:11

What does Paul call this confession at 1 Timothy 6:13? What makes it good?

Jesus adds to his confession with, "but I tell you . . ." What is Jesus referring to? See Daniel 7:13-14.

Despite this warning, Caiaphas is undeterred and tears his clothes to show the great distress and shock done to his religious sensibilities. Caiaphas makes the charge that in their very presence Jesus has committed blasphemy and that no witnesses are needed. Blasphemy carried the punishment of death. See Leviticus 24:16.

Contrary to their procedures for a written verdict, which were to insure a measured and thoughtful decision, the Sanhedrin shouted their verdict. This injustice was followed by violence. Read Matthew 26:66-68. How is this consistent with the prophecies in Psalm 22:12-13 and Isaiah 53:8?

Finally, consider how it is fitting that the Chief Priest orchestrated the killing of Jesus, the Lamb of God?

CONCLUSION

It is jarring to know that the sinless Son of God was tried for crimes He never committed. It is also troubling to see what great lengths people will go to when they want to wrongfully convict someone in the court of public opinion! Jesus' life and ministry were without sin, but He is falsely accused of the sin of blasphemy, and a sentence of death is called for by the people. But we should not forget that this was part of God's plan for the Messiah to suffer in making atonement for our sins.

Our opening prayer reminded us of Jesus' example in turning the other cheek when we are reviled and false things are said about us. In taking vengeance and not forgiving others, we are saying "No" that God's forgiveness of me for the sake of Jesus Christ does not enable me to forgive others and does not free me from anger and resentment. In saying "no" to this hard truth, we are blaspheming God. Our return from blasphemy—from false witness—from hatred and anger begins with repentance and contemplating what we are praying when we say, "And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

In light of this last year and all our experiences and opinions about what happened, read and discuss this recent blog post by Professor John Pless:

*The old Adam is an expert in confessing the sins of others. In the political realm as well as the church it is easy to place the blame on a godless culture and whine about persecution we do not merit while to use words that Thielicke employs elsewhere "the wolves howl in the cellar of the soul." This bit from Thielicke's sermon on the Fifth Petition is worth pondering: "I must begin with myself and my own guilt whenever there is anything to be said about the world's guilt. I cannot simply look out the window and be morally indignant over the great Babylon that lies spread out before me in all its godless darkness. No, what I see out there in global proportions must only remind me of my own "Babylonian heart" (Francis Thompson). And quite involuntarily I will be reminded of the prophet Nathan's hard rebuke to David: "Thou art the man!" I am the one who needs forgiveness, and the sanitation of the world must begin with me." [Helmut Thielicke, *Our Heavenly Father*, p 105]*

Review, as time permits, Luther's Small Catechism on the Fifth Petition to Lord's Prayer.

CLOSING

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, it is with great sorrow that we look upon Your sham of a trial and hear the false witnessing against You who were without sin. Help us when we are haunted by false testimony against us, and remind us what You endured for our sake. Give to us strength, courage, and faith when our enemies say all kinds of false things against us on account of You, knowing that we are blessed by You, who truly are the Christ, the Son of the living God. By the power of Your Holy Spirit, may we confess this always, but with faith and love, firmly believing and holding on to this saving faith in You, even unto death. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

WEEK 5 . Return from Denial



OPENING ... Luke 22:31-34, 54-62

Read Joel 2:13 together...

**Return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.**

Prayer: Merciful Lord, on the night when You were betrayed in the Upper Room, You foretold that all the disciples would leave You, in fulfillment of Scripture. When Peter assured You that he would follow You to prison and even death, You met his words with the astonishing truth that he would instead deny You three times that very night. Fill us with steadfast faith and courageous confession in the midst of all the dangers and troubles that threaten the faith of our hearts and the confession of our mouths that You will confess us to Your Father in heaven on the Last Day. In Your holy name we pray. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

The wording of our text (Luke 22:54-62) shows us how passive Jesus is now, allowing Himself to be arrested and led away. The frightened Peter follows the arresting force from a distance—just far enough behind as to not be noticed or to risk being arrested himself. Some say love moved Peter to follow but fear kept him at a distance. But was Peter even to follow based on what Jesus said as recorded in John 18:7-11? Was Peter trusting and obeying Jesus or just following his own misguided love?

In these verses, we are reminded of Luther's meaning to the First Commandment: "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things." Peter's boastful words in the Upper Room (Luke 22:31-34) set the stage that we may see Peter fearing something more than God, loving something more than Jesus, and trusting something other than Jesus as the Word of God.

In the *Large Catechism*, Martin Luther includes these questions for examining yourself about the First Commandment: "Let everyone, then, see to it that he values this commandment great and high above all things. Do not regard it as a joke! Ask and examine your heart diligently (2 Cor. 13:5), and you will find out whether it clings to God alone or not. If you have a heart that can expect of Him nothing but what is good—especially in need and distress—and a heart that also renounces and forsakes everything that is not God, then you have the only true God.

If, on the contrary, your heart clings to anything else from which it expects more good and help than from God, and if your heart does not take refuge in Him but flees from Him when in trouble, then you have an idol, another god." Return to these questions in going through this week's study, particularly when you are challenged to consider what idols took roost in your lives this past year.

Q & A

Transition: Read Luke 22:31-34. In the Upper Room, Peter is told by the Lord that Satan wanted to sift him like wheat and have him. Jesus prays for Peter about this troublesome development, that Peter's faith may not fail. For Jesus knows that Peter will face a severe trial and that Satan's goal is to destroy Peter's faith in Christ. The impetuous, confident, and even cocky Peter professes that he is ready to follow Jesus to prison or even death. Peter's words will come back to haunt him.

Q1. In Luke 22:31-32, Jesus repeats Peter's name revealing just how concerned he was about Peter's coming trial. And Jesus uses the name, Simon, which was his given name before Jesus renamed him Peter, "Petros," which means rock. What do you think Jesus may have been indicating to Peter in using the name Simon? Read Matthew 16:16-17.

Does Jesus' revelation that Satan "demanded to have you that he might sift you like wheat" remind you of another biblical situation? Job 2?

How would you describe the sifting of wheat as like the testing of your faith? Amos 9:9.

Does Jesus tell Peter when Satan's sifting would take place?

The "you" in Satan's demand is plural, so Jesus was telling all the apostles that their faith would soon be tested. In singling out Peter, could Jesus be giving a special warning to him because he would be facing a more severe trial? Because Peter's personality made him more vulnerable?

What does Jesus tell them that he has done because of Satan's demand? The word "fail" here means something like being eclipsed.

What assurance does Jesus give Peter? verse 32b.

What personal comfort can you take from the fact that Jesus had already provided the means for preserving Peter's faith and the other apostles' faith from complete spiritual disaster? Read 1 Cor. 10:13.

How does Peter's response at verse 33 contradict what Jesus just told him?

Jesus replies as if saying, "So you don't trust my words when you have confessed me to be the all-knowing Son of God? You say you'll be faithful even to death, but I know that you are no match for Satan's assault, for you will deny that you know me three times before the rooster crows today!"

How was Peter's response to Jesus a First Commandment problem? 2 Cor. 10:17-18.

Transition: Read Luke 22:54-62. Previously in our text, Jesus is seized by the temple guards after being betrayed by Judas's kiss. He is led to Caiaphas's house to be questioned. The focus here shifts to Peter in the Gospel of Luke as it says that Peter began following at a distance. The gospel of John says that Peter and "another disciple," presumably John, were following. John 18:15

Q2. We've mentioned Peter's love moving him to follow Jesus and then fear for his life getting the best of him. Or, instead of love, do you think that Peter was just unable to help himself and had to follow? Read John 18:8.

Should Peter have not understood Jesus as saying that he did not want the apostles to follow the arresting party? If so, was Peter disobedient in not listening, in drawing his sword (John 18:10-11), and in following the arresting party? In what or whom was Peter trusting instead of God? In what jeopardy had Peter put himself?

Does this broaden your understanding of Jesus' instruction at Matthew 26:41?

How would you describe the First Commandment problem here?

Transition: When he reaches the gate to the courtyard of the high priest's place, the temple guards are there standing around a fire to keep warm. Peter joins them to stay warm. As it says at Matthew 26:58, Peter wanted to see the outcome, even though Jesus had already told them plainly that with the Passover, he would "be delivered up to be crucified." Matthew 26:2. Maybe he had forgotten or chosen to ignore what Jesus said. Or, maybe Peter was telling himself that it was good for him to be there and to see it for himself. Whatever the case, Peter soon found himself where he should not be, and the fear that he was feeling would only be growing. Fear can be a powerful motivator. It can trigger emotional responses and impulses that surprise us. It can make us irrational.

Q3. Read John 18:15-18. Who was the first one to recognize Peter? How does Luke describe this first situation and Peter's response? Luke 22:56-57. Is it surprising to you that Peter is so quick to deny in these circumstances? Why or why not.

Transition: Telling the truth can be frightening at times, particularly when we don't know how it will be taken or what consequences will come from it. The loss of popularity and acceptance can seem like a huge risk at the time. Not wanting to admit something about ourselves for fear of how it will be received also can lead us down some hard paths.

Could a message here be, "Don't warm yourselves at the fires of Jesus' enemies. It could be dangerous." Have you ever found yourself in such a situation and were tempted to deny Jesus?

Q4. Read Luke 22:58 and John 18:25. Who was the second one to recognize Peter? How did Peter respond? If Peter is also watching what is happening inside, what do you think Peter is feeling at this point?

Transition: Though, according to the Gospel of Mark 14:66-69, the rooster has already crowed once, the words of Jesus in the Upper Room have not yet occurred to Peter: "Before the rooster crows twice" Soon enough, he will remember as the fowl sound pierces the night air once more. The words of Christ will return to Peter's memory and pierce his heart.

Q5. The third time came about an hour later (Luke 22:59)-perhaps time enough for Peter to cool down, unless, of course, he was pondering the first two unwelcome accusations during that hour. What did the third person say? Compare Luke 22:59 with John 18:26.

What was Peter's response this time? Compare Luke 22:60 with Mark 14:71 and Matthew 26:74. What reveals the level of Peter's panic and fear? What additional commandment(s) are implicated?

Transition: We can be quick to judge Peter harshly for his denials without even thinking about how often we fail to stand with Jesus, how easily we can let our lives look nothing like Jesus having first place in them, or how frequently we remain quiet when the truth of God and his teachings are denied by others in our presence.

Q6. Read Matthew 26:74-75. How would you describe what the sound of the rooster crowing meant to the crowd and what it meant to Peter?

Read Luke 22:60-62. How do you imagine the Lord looking upon Peter? Do you think it was only a look of sorrowful reproach? Recall Luke 22:31-32.

Not just reproach, but compassion must have been in Jesus's eyes. "Take heart and let not this eclipse you, for I still love you. I do not reject you, so turn back to me. Yes, your sin is great, but what I go to do is greater, and it will freely pardon you." In his shame and weeping bitterly, there is bitter sorrow. Should we not expect this to be part of repentance? Read 2 Corinthians 7:8-10. Discuss the difference between "godly grief" (remorse for our sin and turning back to our Savior who loves us and gives us the pardon He earned for us) and "worldly grief" (remorse from losing the world's approval followed by the desire and work to regain it).

CONCLUSION

It all happened in less than a day. The warning from Jesus was taken lightly and followed by a boastful denial. Consumed by the unfolding circumstances, Peter does not remember the warning, does not pray, and does not listen. Things then happen very quickly now as Peter's eyes are pained by what he witnesses and his heart broken by what he does. While Jesus is questioned by Caiaphas, Peter is questioned in the courtyard by those who recognize him by the light of the fire. Jesus' words to Peter earlier that night in the Upper Room are being fulfilled. Peter had said he was ready to go to prison and even death with Jesus. But fear can get the best of even loyal men. The one who was so boastful before now shouts in anger at those accusing him of knowing Jesus and even swearing an oath that he does not know Jesus. With the third denial of his Lord, Peter hears the cock crow and sees the disappointment but grace in Jesus' look. Godly grief comes, and returning from denial begins.

CLOSING

Read: Daily Devotion at p. 34 for Monday Lent 4 and discuss how today's lesson applies to this devotion and to how we dealt with the shutdown during the pandemic.

Pray: The Lord's Prayer

