

**Study questions for**

***Extreme Virtues***

***Living on the Prophetic Edge***

by David Fillingim

**Sessions 5 – 8**

**SESSION FIVE: STEADFAST LOVE**

**Scripture Focus:** Hosea 2:2-23 and 6:1-6

**Responsive Reading:** "A Call to Steadfast Love" (Hosea 6:1-6)

**L:** "Come, let us return to the LORD;

**P:** **for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us; he has struck down, and he will bind us up.**

**L:** After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him.

**P:** **Let us know, let us press on to know the LORD; his appearing is as sure as the dawn; he will come to us like the showers, like the spring rains that water the earth."**

**L:** What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early. Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets, I have killed them by the words of my mouth, and my judgment goes forth as the light.

**P:** **For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.**

**Activity One: Exploring the Scripture**

A. Introductory notes on Hosea

- Hosea prophesied at roughly the same time as Amos. Like Amos, he foresaw the destruction of Samaria and the northern kingdom of Israel. Unlike Amos, Hosea

was a native of Israel—the only northerner among the prophets, the rest of whom were from Judah.

- Hosea sees the main sin of Israel as idolatry, but also notes the injustice condemned by Amos.
- Hosea is perhaps best known for his strange marriage, which he employs as a metaphor of the relationship between God and Israel. Hosea's marriage is introduced in 1:2-3 and is the focus of 2:2-23 and 3:1-5. By using his own marriage as a metaphor, Hosea compares Israel's idolatry to adultery and harlotry.
- The idolatry practiced by Israel was not a case of choosing to worship other Gods instead of the LORD. We have to remember that monotheism was a new and strange idea. The majority approach to religion in human history has been to worship as many gods as you can, because you never know which god might be able to help you. This picking and choosing among religions, as if in a cafeteria line, is called eclecticism. It seems that the Israelites could not quite understand that serving the LORD is like marriage—it means forsaking all others.
- Also, Israel's Canaanite neighbors believed that their religious ceremonies were part of good farming practices, and agriculture in the Middle East was (and still is) quite tenuous. So the Israelite were constantly tempted to seek an agricultural advantage by paying service to the Canaanite fertility gods.
- So, in 2:2-23, Hosea employs a double metaphor: 1) idolatry as adultery—worshipping other Gods is a violation the exclusive devotion owed to the LORD, just as adultery is a violation the exclusive loyalty owed to one's spouse. 2) idolatry as harlotry or prostitution—serving the Baals is compared to prostitution in that Israel falsely views abundant crops as payment received from these false gods (see 2:5 and 2:8).
- In 6:1-6, we see a dialogue between God and God's people, in which God rejects the people's repentance because it is too shallow—it is not steadfast.
- Hosea is the prophet of *hesed* or steadfast love—the kind of love God shows to and demands from God's people.

### **Activity Two: Applying the lesson**

A. Have the group compile a list of the various English words sometimes used to translate *hesed*

(the list should include mercy, lovingkindness, faithfulness, compassion). Discuss how each

of these is a facet of steadfast love.

- B. Discuss question 2 on p. 70 of *Extreme Virtues*.
- C. Discuss: What bearing do experiences of disappointment with God or even anger at God have on practicing steadfast love toward God and others?
- D. Discuss: What is the relationship between the feeling of love and the practice of love, and what does each have to with developing the virtue of steadfast love?

- E. Ask group members to share any experiences they've had of practicing spiritual disciplines as a way of nurturing love for God.
- F. Discuss question 5 on p. 71 of *Extreme Virtues*.
- G. Discuss question 1 on p. 70 of *Extreme Virtues*.
- H. Discuss: What are the similarities and differences between the love we are to have for God and the love we are to have for other people?

**Close** by having the group read in unison the prayer on p. 71 of *Extreme Virtues*.

## **SESSION SIX: HOPE**

**Scripture Focus:** Isaiah 61:1-11; Jeremiah 31:32-34

**Responsive Reading:** "A Confession of Hope" (Psalm 42:1-6; Romans 8: 1-2, 18-25, 28)

L: As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for

God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?

**P: My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, "Where is your God?"**

L: These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng, and led them

in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.

**P: Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in**

**God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.**

L: There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of

the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.

**P: I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the**

**glory about to be revealed to us.**

L: For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the

creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected

it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the

freedom of the glory of the children of God.

**P: We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.**

L: For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is

seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

**P: We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.**

### **Activity One: Exploring the Scripture**

#### A. Introductory notes on Isaiah 61:1-11

- Most scholars believe that the book of Isaiah actually contains the work of three different prophets: 1) Isaiah of Jerusalem, who prophesied in Jerusalem in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C—most of Isaiah 1-39 are attributed to Isaiah of Jerusalem, 2) an anonymous prophet who prophesied in Babylon during the Babylonian exile, called Second Isaiah or Deutero-Isaiah by scholars—Isaiah 40-55 are attributed to Deutero-Isaiah, 3) another anonymous prophet who was active in Jerusalem after the return from exile, called Third Isaiah or Trito-Isaiah—Isaiah 56-66 are attributed to Trito-Isaiah.
- It is also believed that Deutero-Isaiah and Trito-Isaiah are somehow direct descendants of Isaiah of Jerusalem—perhaps members of a "school" that carried on Isaiah's legacy after his death—so that the book as a whole represents a single tradition of prophetic thought applied to three different historical periods.
- Isaiah 61, then, is probably addressed to exiles who returned to Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity.
- These verses, describing "the year of the LORD's favor," take the ancient tradition of the jubilee (see Leviticus 25) and apply it to a new situation. The jubilee year was to be a year of release from debt and servitude every fifty years. Isaiah 61 interprets the return from exile and the rebuilding of Jerusalem as God's ultimate jubilee—a release from despair and restoration to hope.
- In Luke 4:16-30, Jesus reads these Isaiah 61:1-2 and declares that his own ministry is the fulfillment of this prophecy. In Christ now all people can be released from bondage to sin and receive the hope of salvation.

#### B. Discuss:

- This chapter contains many poetic images to express the new hope that God promises. Which image(s) do you find most striking and illuminating? Why?
- Which virtues from previous chapters of *Extreme Virtues* are mentioned in Isaiah 61? What is the link between hope and these other virtues?

#### B. Introductory notes on Jeremiah 31:23-34

- Jeremiah was active in Jerusalem at the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. This was a time of great turmoil and suffering which culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and the beginning of the Babylonians Exile in 586 B.C.
- Jeremiah, like Micah before him, warned that Jerusalem would be destroyed as an act of God's judgment on the unfaithful nation of Judah.
- Jeremiah is known as "the weeping prophet" because he struggled with despair and expressed these struggles poignantly and poetically in passages known as Jeremiah's "confessions" (11:8-12:6; 15:10-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-13).
- With his message of doom and personal struggles with despair, Jeremiah may seem an odd choice for a lesson on hope, but as we see in these verses, God promises a new hope beyond the coming judgment—in the form of a "new covenant."
- A very distinctive feature in these verses is the message of individual responsibility in vv. 29-30. The prophets who came before Jeremiah focused on covenant faithfulness as a community responsibility. Jeremiah, anticipating the objection that God is unfair to punish the righteous with the wicked, assures us that each individual bears enough responsibility to justify God's judgment.

B. Discuss:

- What similarities do you see between Jeremiah's message in 31:31-34 and Hosea's message of "steadfast love" discussed in the previous chapter of *Extreme Virtues*? What role does steadfast love play in Jeremiah's promise of hope?

### **Activity Two: Applying the lesson**

A. Jeremiah and Elijah are discussed in the chapter as examples of persons who maintained hope even while struggling with despair. What is the relationship between despair and hope in the Christian life? What things tempt Christians to despair in our day? How can we resist giving in to despair?

B. Discuss questions 1, 2, and 3 on p. 83 of *Extreme Virtues*.

C. What should churches do in order to be communities of hope? How is your church doing at "living toward a vision" of God's future?

**Close** by having the group read in unison the prayer on p. 83 of *Extreme Virtues*.

### **SESSION SEVEN: COURAGE**

**Scripture Focus:** 1 Kings 19:1-16; Jeremiah 1:1-19; Jonah 2:1-10

**Responsive Reading:** "A Call to Courage" (Mark 4:40; Isaiah 40:3-5, 28-31; Romans 8:31, 37; 2 Timothy 1:7; Isaiah 12:2)

L: He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

**P: A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.**

L: Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

**P: Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."**

L: Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.

**P: He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.**

L: He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.

**P: Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted;**

L: but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles,

**P: they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.**

L: What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?

**P: No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.**

L: for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.

**P: Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the LORD God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.**

### **Activity One: Exploring the Scripture**

#### A. Introductory notes on 1 Kings 19:1-16

- Elijah and his successor Elisha appeared relatively early in the historical development of the institution of prophecy in Israel (see the section "Who Were the Prophets?" on pp. 18-20 of *Extreme Virtues*). The Bible preserves almost no record of their actual words, but instead gives stories of their exploits.
- Elijah prophesies in the northern Kingdom of Israel during the reign of Ahab, son of the powerful king Omri. It was the Omri dynasty that established Israel's reputation on the international scene. Ahab is married to the Phoenician princess Jezebel through one of his father's international alliances.
- Jezebel is an activist sponsor of her home religion, making worship of Baal (used in the Bible as a generic term for Canaanite gods) the de facto official religion of Israel.
- Apparently, the people had not completely abandoned the worship of the LORD, but were trying to serve both Baal and the LORD at the same time, as Elijah challenged them: "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Kings 18:21).
- 1 Kings 19:1-16 describes the immediate aftermath of Elijah's dramatic victory over the 400 prophets of Baal at Mt. Carmel (see 1 Kings 18:17-40).

- Fleeing from Jezebel's wrath, Elijah travels from Mt. Carmel on the northern coast of Israel (in modern-day Haifa) southward all the way to Mt. Horeb—another name for Mt. Sinai—somewhere in the Sinai peninsula adjacent to Egypt and the Red Sea. This is an extremely long journey across a vast stretch of desert wilderness.
- While the "still small voice" of the King James Version's rendition of verse 12 is poetic and emotionally appealing, the NRSV's "sound of sheer silence" is more accurate. In these verses, God is absent from the dramatic earth-shaking effects that accompanied the original Sinai theophany. Instead, God is present in the absolute silence and stillness—ironically, God's presence is in the absence of all signs of God's presence.

#### B. Discuss

- What is Elijah's state of mind when he learns of Jezebel's threats (see vv. 3-4, 10)?
- How is Elijah able to make such a long journey? How long does the journey take?
- What is the significance of God's absence from the wind, fire, and earthquake?

#### C. Introductory notes on Jeremiah 1:1-19 (\*note: points 1-3 were covered in the previous session and are included here for review)

- Jeremiah was active in Jerusalem at the end of the seventh and beginning of the sixth century B.C. This was a time of great turmoil and suffering which culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and the beginning of the Babylonians Exile in 586 B.C.
- Jeremiah, like Micah before him, warned that Jerusalem would be destroyed as an act of God's judgment on the unfaithful nation of Judah.
- Jeremiah is known as "the weeping prophet" because he struggled with despair and expressed these struggles poignantly and poetically in passages known as Jeremiah's "confessions" (11:8-12:6; 15:10-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-13).
- Jeremiah 1:1-19 recounts Jeremiah's call from God and first prophetic vision.

#### B. Discuss:

- What is Jeremiah's first response to God's call? What is God's response to Jeremiah's first response?
- What is Jeremiah's vision? What is the meaning of this vision?
- Why do think it is necessary for Jeremiah to "gird up your loins"?

#### B. Introductory notes on Jonah 2:1-10

- The book of Jonah is unlike the other books named for prophets in that it does not preserve the actual word the prophet. Instead, it tells a story.
- Biblical scholars debate whether the book is intended as "history" or as some sort of parable or wisdom lesson.

- Another difference between Jonah and the other prophets is that Jonah is sent by the LORD to prophesy to a foreign nation. Generally, the prophets call God's people to return to covenant faithfulness. But the Ninevites were never part of any covenant with the LORD.
- The story of Jonah unfolds in four episodes—one in each chapter. First, Jonah flees from God's call (ch. 1). Second, Jonah prays from the belly of the fish (ch. 2). Third, the Ninevites repent after hearing Jonah's message and are spared from God's judgment (ch. 3). Fourth, Jonah gets angry and is taught a lesson by God (ch. 4).
- Jonah 2:1-10 is Jonah's prayer from the belly of the fish and is in the form of a Psalm of Thanksgiving—which is odd because a Psalm of Thanksgiving usually thanks God for some past deliverance from danger or trouble, and Jonah is still in danger and trouble.

B. Discuss:

- What are some similarities and differences between Jonah, Elijah, and Jeremiah?
- In what way(s) does Jonah's prayer exemplify courage?

### **Activity Two: Applying the lesson**

A. Discuss: what is the relationship between fear and faith? Are there things that we should rightfully fear?

- B. Discuss: What fears did Elijah, Jeremiah, and Jonah have to overcome? How did they overcome their fears?
- C. Discuss: What are some everyday demands of Christian living that require courage?
- D. Discuss: How can Christians help one another be courageous?
- E. Discuss question 5 on p. 92 of *Extreme Virtues*.

**Close** by having the group read in unison the prayer on p. 93 of *Extreme Virtues*.

## **SESSION EIGHT: PEACE**

**Scripture Focus:** Isaiah 2:1-4; 11:1-9

Responsive Reading: "Praying and Working for Peace" (Psalm 122:6-8; Isaiah 2:2-4; Matthew 5:9; Ephesians 2:14; John 14:27; Matthew 26:52; Philippians 4:7)



*Note: This litany begins with an invocation from Psalm 122. Then, the leader reads the vision of peace from Isaiah 2:2-4 as the people respond at intervals with various New Testament teachings on peace.*

L: Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May they prosper who love you. Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers.

**P: For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, "Peace be within you."**

L: In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.

**P: Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.**

L: Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths."

**P: For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.**

L: For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

**P: Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.**

**Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.**

L: He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks;

**P: Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.**

L: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

**P: And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.**

### **Activity One: Exploring the Scripture**

A. Introductory notes on Isaiah

- Isaiah prophesied in Jerusalem in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. He was a Jerusalem "insider"—a member of the royal court and advisor to kings (though they didn't always listen).
- Isaiah was active in the southern kingdom of Judah at the time the northern kingdom of Israel was nearing its cataclysmic fall to the Assyrians. This was a time of turmoil in the royal court. The ascendancy of Assyrian power in the region tempted kings to form alliances (sometimes by force) that might help them resist Assyrian dominance. Isaiah's advice generally was to avoid such alliances and trust the LORD.
- It is in this context of regional skirmishes and the threat of foreign invasion that Isaiah's promises of peace are to be understood. Against an environment of political intrigue and military maneuvering Isaiah presents a vision of the earth governed by God's peace—*shalom*.
- Christians, of course, see a second layer of meaning in many of these prophecies. In addition to the message Isaiah had for kings and citizens in his own troubled times, Christians see a message of peace and hope for all times in a promise of the coming of Christ.

#### B. Discuss

- What impact would the messages of peace in Isaiah 2:1-4 and 11:1-9 have in eighth century B.C. Judah—in the face of anxiety over international political and military developments?
- What characteristics of an ideal ruler do we see in Isaiah 11:1-5?
- Do you think the "peaceable kingdom" in Isaiah 11:6-9 is intended as an actual prediction of a future state of affairs? If not, what meaning does it have?

### **Activity Two: Applying the lesson**

A. Discuss: What implications, if any, does Isaiah 2:4 have for how Christians should feel about war in our day?

- B. Discuss our nation's current military activity and involvement in terms of the biblical demand for peace.
- C. Discuss: What is the relationship between peace with God, peace with ourselves, and peace with other people?
- D. Discuss: Do you agree that Christians in our society compromise with violence too easily? Why or why not? If so, how can we resist the pressures to accept violence as part of ordinary life?
- E. Discuss: How well is your church doing in promoting peace? What else could/should your church do to promote peace?
- F. Discuss: To what degree is reconciliation possible among Christians of differing convictions? What can we do the move toward reconciliation?
- G. Ask group members if they have tried the prayer exercise described in suggestion 2 on p. 104 of *Extreme Virtues*. If so, discuss the experience.

H. Ask group members to share their experiences in trying to raise peaceful children (see suggestion 3 on pp. 104-105 of *Extreme Virtues*), and/or ask them to share what their own parents tried. Discuss the challenges of raising and/or being peaceful children in a violent world.

**Close** by having the group read in unison the prayer on p. 105 of *Extreme Virtues* (or, if you don't feel confident trying to tackle the pronunciation of all those city names, close with a prayer of your choosing).