

Good Word Schedule

“Family Seasons”

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Good Word Lessons

Spring, 2019

Title: Family Seasons

Derived from the Official Sabbath School lesson authored by Claudio and Pamela Consuegra

Introduction:

The lessons this quarter are going to look at the various rhythms or stages of life that human beings pass through along life's way, something we are all familiar with. The particular context within which the rhythms of life are going to be studied will be within the family. The word "family" today has multiple definitions. At least, multiple definitions are argued for some being as broad as "any people who love each another and live in the same place are family." On account of these being Bible-based lessons, the definition of family is quite traditional, a father (husband), a mother (wife) and whatever children might be born to their union. Of course, there is also extended family involving other close relatives, like grandparents, uncles and aunts, and cousins and so forth. A major point to be made is that family is ideally the primary context in which we experience life. This is a big enough deal that some say the loss of family tends toward the loss of a sense of being. Family is the best agency for human flourishing, assuming that the family is in good order. Along the way, biblical principles will be brought forward to inform and guide the discussion in hopes of making families stronger and better able to thrive.

Lesson 1:

The Rhythms of Life ~ *March 30-April 5*

Texts for this Lesson: *Genesis 1, Gen. 8:22, Ps. 90:10, Job 1:13–19, Acts 9:1–22, Phil. 1:6, Rom. 8:1.*

Memory Text: “To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven” (*Ecclesiastes 3:1, NKJV*).

Opening Question: Does the Genesis story of origins have anything to tell us in the current era?

From the perspective of the Bible, life, including human life, begins at the creation event laid out in Genesis 1. This is a well-known story that is, in our time unfortunately all caught up in a debate over creation vs. evolution. This is unfortunate because the story has a whole lot more to teach us beyond this never-ending debate. Truth is, this is a story that is not only descriptive but is also normative in that it sets the parameters for life on this planet. Let us notice several things from the Genesis 1 story:

- First, the story in Genesis 1 is a story of an Almighty God making something orderly and beautiful out of something chaotic. It is a story from chaos to order, a story that gives us a picture of reality. Certainly, we did not ask to join the reality we are part of, nor do we fully understand it. In fact, given how small our planet is in comparison to how vast the universe is, we have very little hope of figuring out the larger reality we participate in. Agnostics and atheists tend to use this fact as reason to abandon theism saying belief in deity of some kind is merely opinion as we can't possibly hope to make sense of our larger reality enough to be sure of the existence of a God. Theists, on the other hand, rejoice because of the evidences of revelation from God are abundant, clues left in the universe that give us some believable reference points for life. It is in this arena that Genesis 1 shines for it makes it very clear that we are part of a two-dimensional reality, a beautiful and well-ordered natural world overseen by a supernatural world. Or, to put this another way, there is a realm of the Creator and a realm of the creature. These two realms are not at odds, at least they were not at odds at the beginning. Furthermore, the created realm, made up of material substances, is good, declare to be very good even. This stands in marked contrast to some other concepts of the material realm such as that held by the Greeks who saw material substance as very much diminished, even evil, in inherent conflict with the realm of the spirit.
- Secondly, the Genesis 1 story reveals that the world we are part of operates in an orderly fashion. There are cycles and systems that function routinely to make life here possible. The heavenly bodies – sun, moon, and stars – have a function as the systems were set in place to allow for the propagation of the various life-

forms on planet earth. It is significant that these systems were set up by God to operate without direct divine intervention. They have within themselves the ability to continue and to propagate. In this limited sense, the world operates on its own according to the "laws" set up by the Creator. It can therefore be said that not everything that happens on earth is directly or immediately caused by God. It also means that some things can happen on earth that are not the will of God. (Those who doubt this might want to ponder the question, "How many times in a given day do you think the will of God is NOT done?"). This eventuality has significant meaning for humans as far as volition and responsibility go. We have enough latitude for decision-making to be responsible for our actions.

- A third item – and this is one that is particularly germane to our lessons - is that the Genesis story (we should say the Genesis stories for we now need to include also Genesis 2) sets the parameters for family. God, having made other creatures, came back to Adam with the observation that it would not be good for him to be alone. So, God made Eve. And when God brought Eve to Adam, he understood exactly what God was doing and he was quite charmed. In modern language his response was, "Wow!" He fully understood the gift of love and companionship that he and Eve would now share. So begins the human story.

One of the main but obvious points to be drawn from these stories in the beginning of Genesis is that the **human experience is in a very foundational way relational**. We are born into families that provide us with relationships automatically, all things being as they should. Within these relationships we thrive. Without them, we suffer. Families make relationships and they thrive with the maintenance of relationships. It is within these relationships that we pass through all kinds of events and transitions in life.

Those who know the Bible story are well aware that **the pristine nature of human existence changed radically** on account of the Genesis 3 story, the one where sin came in and upset the whole of creation, human life in particular. This story is downplayed today, or even ignored but it is a very important story for it explains the human situation to us. We are noble creatures made in the image of God, but now damaged by something called sin. Further, there is no part of our lives or persons that has not been damaged by sin. That includes even the planet we live on, the natural systems themselves. From the point of the entrance of sin, the rhythms and transitions of life have been radically altered. Perhaps the hardest reality is that we now live temporarily. Our lives have both a beginning and an end. In between our lives are fraught with good and bad things, characterized by vulnerability. Clearly, in the original providence of God, we were to experience only good and that endlessly. So we are not well constituted to face bad things, and we are certainly not well constituted to face endings, death in particular. When death comes, even when its approach is anticipated, it always strikes us as something inherently wrong for humans. We are not made to experience it except with great sorrow and even anger. We are reminded that something is drastically wrong with life now. One consolation is that, even when faced with the adversity of death, family and good relationships can provide a measure of comfort and sustenance.

We close this lesson by focusing on the reflections of the wise king Solomon who penned what is arguably one of the best reflections on the human experience:

“To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to gain, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace” (*Eccles. 3:1-8, NKJV.*)

Questions:

1. **Talk about some of the life-changing experiences that you have been through, and talk about the lessons you learned and, if applicable, the lessons you *should* have learned but didn't.**
2. Talk about how family relationships have helped you in the experiences and transitions you have passed through in life.
3. Was there anything in this lesson that was new to you?

Lesson 2:

The Choices We Make ~ April 6–12

Texts for the Week: Eph. 1:1–4; Matt. 22:35–37; Matt. 7:24, 25; Prov. 18:24; 1 Cor. 15:33; Eccles. 2:1–11.

Memory Text: “And if it seems evil to you to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD” (*Joshua 24:15, NKJV*).

Opening Question: Is human choice something real, or is it a figment or our imaginations, merely a way of speaking?

The lesson this week invites us to have a look at the whole question of humans and choice-making. There has been, and there continues to be, no small amount of debate about the human capacity and the human liberty to make choices. There are some who argue that humans do not really have the latitude to make real choices for, in their opinion, we are driven by our social conditioning or by our bio-chemistry. The way you answer this question has a profound effect on what you think about human responsibility for, if I am not free to make real choices, how can I then be held accountable for my actions? If choice is somehow pre-determined, then how can a person be held accountable for their subsequent actions? On the other hand, if we are free to choose, just how free are we?

It does not take very much reading in the Bible to discover that, from the perspective of scripture, humans not only have broad latitude to choose, they also have to face the reality of whatever consequences come to them subsequent to the decisions made. The story of Genesis 3, and the memory text for this week are well-known places where decision-making is apparent in the Bible, the second item being that great and challenging story of Joshua drawing a proverbial line in the sand declaring that he and his family would “follow the Lord,” thereby challenging others to join with him.

One matter linked to volition is love. It is worth spending some time thinking about love and choice. Can love exist without choice, or is love something volitional that can only exist subsequent to choice? In other words, can you be required to love someone? Or is love something that you risk and give after you have chosen to love? It seems the second option is the viable one. And, since love comes after choice, since it is something that grows after a willing choice, the matter of choice becomes very significant. And, if God is love and wants a universe that responds out of love and in love, then the freedom to choose has to be held sacred. All this, and several items more, make decision-making into something of great significance to Christians.

One question that comes up right away is that of making “right” choices. Of course, some questions are quite easy to answer while some are very difficult especially when we are faced with circumstances where two high-level values clash. Furthermore, there is the issue of consequences. Hopefully, we learn quickly that every choice brings with it a set of consequences. Those who want to live well need, then, to make decisions that bring good consequences into their lives. A person who does that for the whole of life is likely to find themselves in very good circumstances, living well. They are likely to reach old age with a host of good consequences accrued to their lives, something they would be foolish to exchange for the mere potentiality of youthfulness.

With all this in mind, a pressing question arises. How does one go about making good choices? How does one make sure they are making the kinds of choices that bring good consequences into their lives? Key to good decision-making is the question of reference points. What reference points does a person use when making decisions, good ones? Several suggestions are below:

- Reference points that are outside the human self are often the best ones.
- Consult the scriptures to see if there are any guiding principles that might aid in decision-making.
- Consult with older and wiser people. We all have the option of either learning by observing and listening to others or getting our leaning by our own experiences. The first kind of learning is very inexpensive while the second can be very expensive.
- Progress through the decision-making process looking for convictions to grow rather than for signs that supposedly give an indication which way to go. Convictions are things that grow after thought and analysis and prayer and consultation while signs are singular events in time that do not require thought but only observation and immediate interpretation. While asking for signs might seem to be a good way to get the clearest indication of which way to go, it is often the case that the first thing a sign-seeker asks for when the sign they have sought materializes, is to ask for another one to confirm the first one. Gideon in the Old Testament would be a notable example of this.

Questions:

1. Discuss how one can find good reference points in life, established to enable good decision-making.
2. Discuss how to go about choosing and nurturing good friends. What benefits accrue to you if you have good friends? What is the outcome of having bad friends?
3. How would you go about choosing a husband or wife? What might you do in order to find yourself in a good marriage relationship?
4. Give some thought and have some discussion about choosing a course in life. How can you best make decisions about a life-course, a profession, a plan for your life?

Lesson 3:

Preparing for Change ~ April 13–19

Texts for the Week: *1 Cor. 10:1–13, Gen. 2:24, 1 Cor. 13:4–8, 1 Sam. 1:27, Psalm 71, 1 Cor. 15:24–26.*

Memory Text: “Righteousness will go before Him, and shall make His footsteps our pathway” (*Psalm 85:13, NKJV*).

Opening Question: How does one deal constructively with change?

The lesson this week focuses on change, something that is endemic to life. It asks us to think about how we deal with change in helpful and constructive ways. Certainly, as temporal beings who are on a journey from a beginning point to an ending point, we experience change. Some changes turn out to be very good for us while others end up being very detrimental. Some changes come as a result of our own choices but other changes come due to the activities, the actions and decisions of others. This second category is often very challenging for us because we do not get a choice in the outcomes. And sometimes the events or consequences that precipitate into our lives come from the negligence or foolishness of others that then leave us with consequences that are permanent and unchangeable. An accident due to someone’s drunk driving is a case that comes to mind. Sometimes change comes suddenly and unexpectedly; other times, change comes deliberately and slowly. Whatever the case, we are faced with the challenge of dealing with change constructively.

Those of us who live in the West expect change as endemic to life. It might be helpful to bring to mind that there are some cultures that abjure change. Their ambition is to see and experience no change at all from generation to generation. Grandchildren should live the same way as their grandparents did with society making most of their decisions for them. These societies are sometimes called “background” societies for it is the “background” that sets the parameters of life. Societies that allow lots of room for choice are known as “foreground” societies. In foreground societies, there is so much choice available and expected that life can become very confusing.

In the context of families, we can think of a number of significant changes that will come during the course of a lifetime: early childhood development, schooling, a life-work, marriage, having children, retirement, dealing with old age, the final death and the disposition of our possessions. It is a truth of life that all of these items will have to be negotiated in every human life in one way or another.

At this point, it would be well to read **1 Corinthians 10:1-13**. According to the Apostle Paul, the past record of the ancient children of Israel is written down for our

admonition and instruction. What ideas or reflections come to mind having read this and thought about it?

- How can we go about preparing ourselves for the changes we know will come to us?
- Can you think of some examples in the Bible of people who made good choices? Can you think of some that made poor ones?
- What advice would you give to those who are thinking about getting married?
- What might be said to those who are contemplating having children? Certainly, from a biblical perspective, having children is a good thing.
- And what might be said for those who are approaching what would be called old age? Are there some preparations that should be made? And are there some decisions that should be made that would make old age easier to experience? **Psalm 71** might be useful here.
- Though we never like to think of it, what preparations should be made in case death comes? It is an assured fact that preparing for the eventuality of death will not hasten it. And what situation do we leave others in if we make no preparations for death?

Lesson 4

When Alone ~ April 20–26

Texts for the Week: *Eccles. 4:9–12, Phil. 4:11–13, 1 Cor. 7:25–34, Matt. 19:8, Gen. 37:34, Isa. 54:5.*

Memory Text: “And the LORD God said, ‘It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him’ ” (*Genesis 2:18, NKJV*).

Opening Question:

The lesson this week invites us to think about what it is like to be alone in the journey of life. While the ideal in scripture is for us to be in a relational situation that provides companionship, there are most definitely times and circumstances in life that cause people to be alone, at least at times. And some people are constituted to live alone so, while singleness does not appear to be the preferred mode in the Bible, it is certainly not wrong or somehow strange. To push this even further, in many places now, there are more females than males which means that some people will simply never have the chance to get married. And in other places, there are more males than females with the same outcome – some people will never have the chance to get married even if they wanted to.

In the minds of many people, being alone is equated with loneliness. And loneliness is not good for people. When we experience it, we find it quite burdensome. But, when thinking about being alone it is important to realize that loneliness is not so much about being alone as it is about not having any supporting relationships. And may occur even in the midst of many people at times. There are reliable indications that people in big cities, for example, can be very lonely even though there are a lot of human beings around. And young people who are in college also often report high levels of loneliness even though there are many others just like them all around. So what advice can be given, what actions taken to address those times in life when people are alone and lonely?

One situation that leads to aloneness is that of being unmarried. Sometimes this occurs because a person did not find anyone to marry even though they tried. But on other occasions, singleness occurs by choice. And let it be said, a decision not to marry may be good for some people. A single person is certainly freer to come and go, to make decisions about life and mission that do not encumber others so that decisions can be made very cleanly. There are other reasons not to marry, like service, or the presence of some disease, or the concern over bad relationships. Certainly, there are numerous biblical characters who did not marry, among whom Jesus would be chief. Forming friendships around mission, work, or some other event can be helpful to those

who are alone. And those who have established companions can certainly work to include those who are alone in their family circles.

A more difficult situation comes when a marriage ends. Here we have in mind marriage that was disrupted to the point of divorce. Divorce is a difficult subject to trace through scripture because the comments on the matter are so diverse and even confusing. The best commentary on divorce is in Malachi 2:16. Here we discover God does not so much ascribe blame to people as he sorrows over the effect of divorce. Sometimes divorce is necessary while at other times it comes under inadvisable circumstances. Whatever the case, it should be noted that divorce is not listed as an unpardonable sin in the Bible. It is much more to be seen as a tragedy that prevents the intended blessings of marriage from being realized. Furthermore, the old idea of divorced and remarried people living in some kind of "state of adultery" is not thought tenable anymore. That understanding of things mistakes some advice about divorce as being in the form of a code that is to be universally applied, but the truth is that most of what the Bible has to say is more like a casebook study. And advice given in particular circumstances does not warrant attempts at universal application.

Some of the most difficult forms of being alone come because a loved one has died. This is especially true for those who have been married happily for a long time. There is no resolution for this kind of grief except for others to gather around and provide love and support.

One other type of aloneness mentioned in the lesson is that which comes about when one spouse differs from another in terms of religious belief or practice. In such circumstances, great loneliness can occur even if there is no hostility. Again, this calls for other believers to rally round to provide fellowship. Truth is, God calls very few believers to travel to the Kingdom all by themselves.

Questions:

1. Can you bring to mind occasions of being alone that might be insightful or informative or even therapeutic for others to hear?
2. Talk about possible indicators in your community that might indicate that some people are lonely and could benefit from human contact.
3. What suggestions can you come up with that your church community might use to come alongside those who are alone?

Lesson 5:

Wise Words for Families ~ April 27- May 3

Texts for the Week: *Prov. 5:3–14; Matt. 19:5; 1 Cor. 7:3, 4; Prov. 13:22; 14:26; 17:22; 23:13; 31:10–31.*

Memory Text: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths” (*Proverbs 3:5, 6, NKJV*).

Opening Question: Can you bring to mind any favorite sayings, proverbs, or anecdotes that teach wisdom?

The lesson this week is entitled “Wise Words for Families.” It consists of a perusal of some of the advice found in the biblical book of Proverbs. Proverbs is a very interesting book that is made up of wise sayings many of which are attributed to the ancient King Solomon. It is an interesting book to read because of its pithy and often humorous sayings.

Do you have any favorite sayings that we might bring to mind here?

The proverbs range over all kinds of subjects and have lots of good things to say. We will look at some of these as they pertain to a number of areas that are of interest and concern to families.

The first area of focus in the lesson is on **marital fidelity**. A key set of verses is Proverbs 5:3-14. Here the wise man reflects on the dangers and the after-effects of illicit relationships particularly sexual ones. Sexual interest is pretty strong in the human experience. If it is not bridled, it can run rampant and cause all kinds of chaos in human lives. The biblical ideal, is for sex to be experienced within the bounds of marriage where there is love, commitment and security. Sex, beyond its ability to produce offspring, is a powerful bonding agent between humans, one that plays a significant role in marriage. When sexuality is reduced to being merely an instrument of pleasure, its capacities are diminished and people can easily feel used and even abused. In our day, illicit sex carries with it the specter of sexually transmitted disease too, some of which cannot be remedied. A firm commitment to the divine design for sexual expression is not only prudent. It is best.

In the book of Proverbs, there is quite a bit of **good advice for fathers**, too. The following verses are some good examples: *Prov. 13:22; 27:23, 24; Prov. 14:26; Prov. 15:1, 18; 16:32; Prov. 15:27.* We know that fathers have a very significant impact or effect on their children. Fathers provide support, a sense of security, guidance, modeling, discipline, and love. Fathers need to give priority to their families, more so than they give to their work. It should be noted that perhaps the most significant thing a father can do

for his children is love their mother consistently and openly. A father's integrity is also something of great value to his family.

The matter of discipline always seems to come up when we talk about fathers. The old rule had to do with the use of the stick or cane. Interestingly, while Proverbs does speak of the rod, it speaks much more of discipline with love. The goal of discipline, after all, is not just to punish or instill fear as a means of control. Discipline is to be administered with an eye to the future. Discipline should be done within the context of hope for a good future for the child. We discipline now with the intention of directing the child toward a good adulthood.

Another point made in Proverbs, albeit somewhat indirectly, is **the value of humor**. For example, there is a famous text (Proverbs 17:22) that says, "A merry heart does good like a medicine, but a broken spirit drives up the bones. (NKJV). There are some humorous proverbs as well. The point seems to be that lives lived with good faith and a dose of good humor can be very good. Humor, after all, enables us to deal with sometimes difficult things without being crushed by them.

It seems we cannot leave this lesson without talking about the famous chapter that talks about **a noble wife**, chapter 31. This chapter extolls a virtuous and productive wife. It is probably best to see this as a statement of an ideal rather than a set of directives for women to achieve if they want to be considered noble. The list of things is so long and notable that it seems not possible for any one person to achieve or do all the things listed in this chapter. Piling these expectations on one person is likely to produce despondency more than anything else. At the same time, the chapter is enlivening to read for it depicts a man who is quite charmed and impressed with his good wife. That is something that certainly should be aspired to.

The main point to be taken from this lesson is that life is best when families thrive, when fathers are noble and good, when they have integrity in life and in relationships, when their love for their families is evident and well demonstrated by their actions, when discipline is carried out in love and with an eye to the future, when mothers engage in noble enterprises, when they exhibit love for their husbands and children, when there is good humor, when the family is devoid of some sort of always present low grade relational malaise.

Questions:

1. How do the qualities on exhibit in Proverbs 31 compare to the ideals modern society holds out for women?
2. What might be said or done to help prevent people from slipping off into illicit sexual relationships and the carnage they tend to produce?
3. What might be done to help restore those who have made a mess of things? Can sexual sins, or serious relational sins be redeemed? Are you willing to receive a

relational sinner back into your life? What are the blessings, and what are the dangers of doing that kind of thing?

4. How might individuals and families keep the ideals laid out by God through scripture in the forefront of their minds and experiences?

Lesson 6:

The Royal Love Song ~ May 4-10

Texts for the Week: *Song of Solomon; Gen. 2:7; 1 Cor. 7:3–5; John 17:3; 1 John 1:9; Rom. 1:24–27; Gal. 5:24.*

Memory Text: *“Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is as strong as death, jealousy as cruel as the grave; its flames are flames of fire, a most vehement flame.” (Song of Solomon 8:6, NKJV).*

Opening Question: The Bible is not shy about sex and sexuality. Should we be?

The lesson this week is drawn from the Old Testament book, The Song of Solomon, the little book about which there is lots of discussion. According to some, the Song of Solomon is a book that describes the relationship between a young bride - called the Shulamite - and her beloved, thought to be King Solomon. This book has often been read and interpreted allegorically as a symbol of the relationship between God and God's people, of the relationship between Christ and his church. But, it may also be seen as a poem in which the dimensions of a very real relationship between a man and a woman who are in love are explored. If you have read the book, you know the mysteries of human intimacy and conjugal love - sex - are spoken of. This is one of the places where we see that the Bible is not shy about human activities, sex included. Indeed, spread across the pages of scripture are all manner of stories that tell of the sexual exploits, from the good and noble to the terrible, of humans in various stations of life.

The Song of Solomon can also be read as a book that speaks quite openly about intimacies often in poetic or cryptic language. Interestingly, this may be seen as a reflection of the fact that **people often find it hard to talk of intimacies**, especially when there are often a lot of taboos that surround the subject of sex. It might be good to ponder why taboos exist around sex and sexuality.

Perhaps the best place to begin a discussion of sex and sexuality is by noting that, as far as God is concerned, **the human body and its drives, is not evil or dirty**. So often in history, a distinction has been drawn between the “spirit,” which is thought to be good and noble, and the “flesh,” which is evil and dirty and ignoble. This was the view of the Greeks and other ancient people who subscribed to the idea of a dualistic universe where matter was bad and spirit was good. Because sexuality was part of the flesh, it was deemed bad except for purposes of procreation. A strange contrast of the time was also the idea that, since the body was of no consequence for it would perish and return to dust, then what a person did with it was of no concern. Or it was viewed as something irrelevant for the body was going to perish anyway. These ideas about the body cannot be supported by the Bible. From its very first chapter, the Bible speaks of the material

realm, human bodies included, as being good, made so by God himself. The whole of life is then to be seen as sacred, something to be lived openly before God. This is true in the Book of Solomon where the human body is admired, where the physical aspects of marriage are not spoken of with embarrassment.

One aspect discussed in the Song of Solomon is that friendship is something to be shared between the husband and the wife not just physical intimacy. In Song of Solomon 5:16, the wife says quite explicitly, "This is my friend!" Happy is a husband and wife who can count each other friends. The physical intimacies of life are best shared in the context of friendship.

Another aspect of intimate love found in the Song of Solomon is connected to the invitation, made several times, of one spouse to the other using a metaphor, to "come into my garden." Some commentators see this as an indication that intimacies should never be imposed on another or coerced, but rather should be volitional, offered freely to the other. Certainly, love is not coercive and neither is friendship.

In Song of Solomon chapter 4, there is an indication about preserving intimate love **for the right time**. In this chapter, the Shulamite preserves herself for the time after marriage. The language is cryptic here to be sure, but we see in this chapter a joyous invitation after the marriage to enter her garden, an invitation for her husband to revel in her beauty and charms, to rejoice that she is now his forever, not as a possession but as a companion. Some commentators see this as an extolling of pre-marital chastity, something regarded as universally good in the Bible and also by a great many cultures even to this day.

In light of the items above, believers are invited to be careful about how they express their sexual interests realizing that sexuality is a powerful drive that can get out of hand if it is not properly bridled. Intimate relations in the right framework can be a great blessing. Out of place, they can be a real burden, bringing sorrow and pain into a person's life.

Questions:

1. What might be done to allay the messages of popular culture that suggest sexual intimacies should be available to all without restriction?
2. How do people in the believing community work toward redeeming those who have fallen victim to inappropriate sexual behaviors?
3. How do we uphold some of the various and useful taboos without making sex look like it is "dirty" and unseemly even for married people?

Lesson 7:

Keys to Family Unity ~ May 11-17

Verses for the Week: *Gen. 33:12–14, Ruth 1:16–18, John 17:21–26, Gal. 3:28, Eph. 2:11–22, 5:21–6:9.*

Memory Text: “That they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me” (John 17:21, NKJV).

Opening Question: “What can be done to enhance or improve family unity?”

In the lesson today, we are invited to think about various keys, or rules, that can aid in family unity. It is good to keep in mind that the whole question of unity goes all the way back to the Trinity, the place where unity is founded. This unity should be reflected in the church and also in the family. The big question is, “How do we help this to become a reality?”

Several points can be made. The first is that, a Christian is one who has been asked, in order to receive divine help from outside for the purposes of salvation, to agree to **move self out of the center of life**. This is not something a human can do easily. But when a sense of the inability to save oneself sweeps over a person due to their conviction about sin, then the Spirit makes it possible. Self is disabled, moved off the throne. Autonomy is no longer prized as much as reliance on God for help and guidance, for growth toward maturity. It is only when this takes place that a real prospect of finding unity emerges. Put another way, the Bible speaks of pride as being one of the worst sins, if not the very worst, a sin that God finds particularly offensive. This is because pride prevents a person from surrendering their autonomous existence thereby creating a situation where they intend to save themselves. This cannot work at all, for no human can be good enough, no human has capacity enough to save themselves. But with self off the throne of life, humility can take over and the chance for unity emerges because unity is built on humility and gentleness.

Another way of talking about this is to talk of selfishness. Selfishness is the destroyer of unity and is, subsequently, a destroyer of family unity. It is only when the gospel has softened the hearts and moved the self away from the center of things where it demands primary place that unity can grow.

One word that often comes up when talking about unity and humility is the word “submission.” The most notable appearance of this word is Ephesians 5 where Paul is talking about the need for unity. According to v. 21, the goal and key is for believers to be humble enough they become willing to submit to each other. Paul then uses three examples of submission – husbands and wives, parents and children, and

“masters and slaves.” Here we need to be very careful for it is often the case that what Paul intended gets lost in the discussion, particularly when talking about husbands and wives. The best way to describe what Paul is calling for here is the phrase, “deferential reciprocity.” Among believers, there should be a reciprocal display of humility, the willingness to defer to another. This is not a call for abject servitude as is sometimes asked for. Companionship does not seek dominance but reciprocity, unity.

It is also very important not to confuse unity and uniformity. The two are not at all the same. Unity is something that the Holy Spirit grows inside of us where we feel united, like we are working together, like we are traveling through life together while uniformity is more like everyone being, or appearing to be, the same.

While unity is something that the Holy Spirit engenders in the human heart, it is also something that needs to be worked at in order to grow and enhance it. It is quite possible, by developing arrogant and prideful attitudes, to destroy unity. At the same time, it is quite possible, by nurturing humility and gentleness, to grow unity. True unity, which is not like uniformity at all, is something beautiful to behold. It is also something wonderful to enjoy and participate in. It comes when people walk with God realizing that Christ is the one who obtained for them salvation, something He did for each believer to no greater degree than he did for another. When the gift of salvation is fully realized and embedded in life, it is quite possible for people of all kinds and colors and ages and economic standings to live contentedly together with a profound sense of unity.

Questions:

- 1. What is the best way to get self out of the center of life?**
- 2. What concrete actions can you take to help foster unity in your home and in the community where you dwell?**
- 3. What ideas do you have about addressing those who are found trashing unity by their actions and words?**
- 4. Is unity always benefitted by people being compliant?**

Lesson 8:

Season of Parenting ~ May 15-24

Texts for the Week: *Gen. 18:11; Jer. 31:25; Matt. 11:28; Psalm 127; Prov. 22:6; 1 Sam. 3:10–14; Phil. 3:13.*

Memory Text: “Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb is a reward” (Psalm 127:3, NKJV).

Opening Question: “Is there a good recipe for parenting?”

So we come now to a lesson on the subject of parenting. In one way or another, we are all affected by parenting either in our growing up years or later when we are called on to be a parent. Further, the propagation of the human race is itself linked to parenting. Where parenting is done carefully and well, people thrive. Where it is neglected or done poorly, people suffer.

So what can be said about the Bible and parenting? What can we say about parenting today? First, that it is a significant challenge but one that can be very rewarding. And, certainly, the norm for all of history has been for people to become parents. But not all people become parents. Some do not become parents because they choose not to due to a host of reasons a common one being the nature of life, how complicated and even wicked it is. Others do not become parents because they are unable to for some reason or another. These reasons can range from not marrying to some medical or biological issue that prevents conception and pregnancy. Because of the dynamics that are found here, it is always a good idea to approach the subject of parenting with sensitivity. Some people do not want to parent; some would like to but are unable to; some have as many children as they like.

Questions:

1. Think about how you might approach and talk about parenting to people in each of the groups mentioned above – those who choose not to have children; those who cannot have children; those who have children.
2. Might it be possible for those who want children but cannot have them to find a way to come alongside those who have children to enter their common experience? They could become childless parents, perhaps?

There are several aspects to parenting that we might explore. The first is that the way people go about the task of parenting is very much connected to their perceptions of human beings, what we are by nature. If humans are basically bad, then parenting tends to be authoritarian and sometimes harsh. If parents happen to think people are

basically good, then they will let their children self-actualize on their own believing that love will lead the children aright. If they see humans as good but contaminated by sin, they will be inclined to give guidelines but not harsh ones. This latter zone is the best one for parenting. Children tend most readily to come out as well-balanced adults who have not much junk in their lives. The first category tends to produce rebellious children while the second one results in children who may turn out well but are likely to have a lot of misdoings along the way.

We might also note that the Bible gives examples of good parents as well as not-so-good ones. Can you think of some in each of these categories? To get you started, you might think of Abraham who became the father of three generations of liars because of his example.

Another aspect to give thought to is that of single parenting, likely one of the most challenging undertakings known to humans. Often those who parent alone face the assumption that they had their child out of wedlock when, in reality, there are many reasons that could have caused the situation of being a single parent – Hagar was driven out of her home due to jealousy; the woman Elijah was went to stay with was a widow; Bathsheba became pregnant because of the sexual advance of a powerful man; somewhere along the way while raising Jesus, Mary lost her husband Joseph making her a single parent. So give some thought to how a church family might be of significant assistance to people who, for one reason or another, end up being single parents.

One of the very difficult items associated with parenting has to do with children who decided to walk away from the belief systems their parents gave them, systems the parents hold dear. What then? The first thing to bring to mind is that humans have freedom of choice so it is quite possible that a child may decide to go his or her way even when a parent has done a very good job teaching them. Probably the best way to proceed with this is to manifestly love your wayward child, and also to pray for them continually and not lose hope. A key element is to refrain from antagonizing the child thereby making a permanent rift.

Parenting does provide many opportunities for a parent to disciple a child, teaching them the ways of God, showing them the ways of God. It is a good thing to keep in mind that actions speak far louder than words.

Lesson 9:

Times of Loss ~ May 25-31

Texts for the Week: *Mark 5:22-24; 35-43; 1 Peter 5:6, 7; Gen. 37:17-28; Luke 16:13; Rom. 6:16; 1 Cor. 15:26.*

Memory Text: "Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ" (Philippians 3:8, NKJV).

Opening Question: What are we do to when we experience loss?

One of the sad realities about life on this planet is that we experience, over and over again, losses. In fact, the presence of loss is so endemic to human experience that some who are a bit cynical are wont to say life is an exercise in navigating losses. They point out that a little child has lots of options but, by the time old age comes, those options are pretty much all used up. In other words, we have lost everything along the way.

The story of loss begins with the sin of Adam and Eve. They lost their innocence, their untarnished relationship, their Eden home, the chance to talk face-to-face with God, then their son, and the list goes on. Our experiences mirror theirs to a large extent.

In the lesson, we are invited to contemplate a number of types of losses. First, the loss of health. While we certainly can affect the health we have and enjoy, we cannot ultimately prevent the decline of health that finally leads to death. The loss of health can be particularly hard to endure when it brings pain.

- Talk about what we might do to enhance health, but also talk about what we might do to sustain ourselves when health goes away.
- What can we do to be of help to those who suffer from bad or declining health?

Another type of loss is the loss of trust. This can come in many ways but is particularly difficult to endure when the trust invested in a friend is broken. A particular category worthy of mention here are those occasions where trust is lost due to violence of some kind. It seems very important to make the point that violence perpetrated on someone is not their fault at all. Doing violence is a decision the perpetrator makes and for which they should be held accountable.

- Can you think of some biblical examples where trust, particularly between friends or spouses, was lost?
- What course of action can be undertaken when trust has been lost? What can be done to restore it?
- What happens when people try to rush the restoring of broken relationships?
- How would you help someone who has suffered violence?

There is also the matter of the loss of freedom that comes with the creation of addictions. Here, there is a lot of room for thought and discussion, about avoiding the creation of addictions as well as ways to get out from under them:

- **What might a person do to avoid the developing of binding habits that are bad?**
- **How would you help a friend who has an addiction?**
- **What might a church community do for those addicted?**

A final category of loss that might be discussed is the loss of life. Usually we experience this as the loss of the life of a friend or relative. At some point, we then face the reality of the loss of our own lives.

- **Have you lost a loved one? Does that give you any clues into how you might be of help to someone who has lost a loved one?**
- **Have you thought about the day of your own passing? What might you do to prepare yourself for that day?**
- **What might be done to help your loves ones prepare for the day you die?**

Lesson 10:

Little Times of Trouble ~ June 1-7

Texts for the Week: Matt. 7:5; Eph. 1:7; Phil. 2:4–8; Eph. 4:26, 27; James 1:19, 20; Col. 3:19; Matt. 7:12.

Memory Text: “Be angry, and do not sin’: do not let the sun go down on your wrath” (Eph 4:26, NKJV.)

Opening Question: **What do we do when conflict comes home?**

The lesson this week delves into the reality that we all live with on this planet where everything is broken, that sometimes we experience conflict even at home. Conflict can come for any number of reasons – over finances, over disagreements due to parenting, to different opinion on how religion should be practiced, and the list goes on. Sometimes the conflict is mild but at other times it can be quite intense as would be the case where there is abuse of some kind going on in a home. Conflicts over religion can also be very intense. So what is a person to do when these occasions of trouble come along?

One of the first things to keep in mind is that, because we are imperfect and because we live in an imperfect world, the appearance of trouble should not be a surprise. What is in mind here is the expectations you have about life. Realistically, we should be prepared to have to deal with conflict because it is endemic to life on this earth. We are not perfect, and the members who end up making our families, are not perfect either. Being realistic about the probability of conflict is a very good beginning place.

A second thing to keep in mind is that it is seldom a good thing to keep running away from conflict. Certainly, the prospect of conflict is usually unpleasant, even unnerving, and we instinctively want to avoid it but facing the conflict is usually the best way toward its resolution. Facing the conflict and finding a way through it is what opens the door to a new level of equilibrium in a relationship.

When facing and dealing with conflict, it is a very good idea to remember that conflict is best managed when tensions are low. Once conflict escalates, the prospects of issues being properly dealt with goes way down. Finding a way to handle issues when conflict levels are low is often more an art than a science. Sometimes it is necessary to enlist the help of a third party to facilitate the discussion.

One element involved in conflict that should be carefully discussed is the issue of anger. Anger is a very powerful emotion that can easily get out of control. Because of that, it is a dangerous emotion. At the same time, anger does serve a legitimate and valuable purpose in life. For one thing, it is what gives us the gumption to deal with

wrong. Ephesians 4:26 and 27 have some interesting things to say about anger not the least of which is that it is possible to be angry without sinning! Further, there is something called "righteous indignation," a proper anger that is directed toward righting wrong and injustice. When thinking about this, two major points prevail, first, that getting angry involves a choice. The person getting angry chooses to get angry so is responsible for their anger. Just keeping that little fact in mind oftentimes mitigates the anger. It is not true that others make us angry. It is rather, that we chose to exhibit anger in response to what others may have done. Secondly, good anger is almost never focused on self. Good anger is not used to serve the interests of self but rather of right and good.

One other item – a very sad one – needs to be discussed here and that is the sad fact that in some relationships, in some homes, there is abuse. Sometimes, one partner or the other chooses to exercise dominance to the point they mistreat others even to the point of being violent. We all need to recognize that this kind of thing is not only unacceptable. It is intolerable! It is totally inimical to Christian life and behavior. As the official lesson so ably stated, "a healthy relationship is one in which both partners feel protected and safe, in which anger is managed in a healthy way, and in which serving one another is the norm."

One final item warrants a bit of time, the matter of forgiveness. Forgiveness is the process of burying offenses to the point they no longer affect relationships and doing so not so much for personal peace but because we ourselves have been forgiven. Further, forgiveness is something that is offered to another person in the face of offense. It is while the offense is hot in our minds that the need to forgive arises. And, partly because forgiveness is not conditioned by what preceded it, it is a very powerful thing indeed. It can erase, in a matter of moments, the hostilities of many years. One of the things we should expect to do is offer forgiveness to family members for, in the dynamic of life on this planet, there will be many opportunities to do so.

We close with a wonderful but challenging verse - Romans 12:10 (NIV)¹⁰ **Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.**

Lesson 11:

Families of Faith ~ June 8-14

Texts for the Week: *Acts 10:1–28, 34, 35; 1 Cor. 2:2; 1 Thess. 5:21, 22; John 1:12, 13; 3:7; 1 John 5:1.*

Memory Text: “Therefore . . . let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1, 2, NKJV).

Opening Question: How are gospel-oriented people supposed to relate to culture?

Is culture... good or bad?

The lesson this week takes up a very interesting question, the question of culture and how believers should relate to the culture they belong to. We will look at this in two very different ways.

First, there is the matter of the relationship of the gospel and its principles to any given culture. Certainly it is true that the gospel never came to any group of people without bringing some kind of cultural setting with it. In other words, the gospel always gets situated in some culture or another and when people in that culture become missional, they convey their understanding of the gospel to those they missionize. And those who receive the gospel, receive it with at least some of the cultural trappings of those who brought them the good news. The challenge then becomes two-fold. First, they have to work toward removing the essence of the gospel from the cultural trappings it came to them with. Then they have to figure out how the truths of the gospel relate to their own culture. Certainly it is true, the gospel accommodates itself quite well to some cultural values but it is also certainly true that it is opposed to others. This means that those who brought the gospel to others will need to be willing to see the practice of their message changed. And those who receive it will have to face the prospect that some of the things they are accustomed to, do not fit with the gospel so will need to be abandoned. Even a few moments of thought about this will be enough to indicate that there is lots of difficult work to be done here, and a lot of place for disagreement.

One example of this tension and the way it plays out is all the current talk that is divisive of the work done by expatriate missionaries particularly those from Europe who, in times past, went out over the whole world carrying with them the gospel enculturated in European forms. It is now very clear that they did not well understand that the gospel is not primarily European. In consequence, they tried, under the banner

of the gospel, to change native cultures to be as much like European culture as possible. From this vantage point, it is clear they erred. They failed to recognize that, within the cultures they evangelized, there were ideas and principles that were quite in harmony with the gospel that should be preserved. There was no need to try so hard to Europeanize everyone else as much as they did. The reaction today to this failure of the past is a rather strong antagonism toward things European today. We will not pretend to know how to resolve this except to perhaps make a call for charity as the commitment called for from those who gave their lives to mission work was truly exemplary. And the problem remains one of figuring out precisely what cultural trappings fit the gospel and what do not. And we still face the call to be courageous enough to adjust culture to the gospel wherever it is proclaimed.

The second line of thought is a very different one. It runs along the lines of deliberating on how a believing family can be protected from the unhappy influence of some of the unhappy trappings of whatever culture said family finds itself in. Certainly it is true that culture can have very adverse effects on belief, particularly in places where secularism is very strong. One place to look for an example of this is Judges 2:7-13 where the story is told of the nearly wholesale departure from belief that came on the heels of the death of Joshua and the leaders of his generation. Under their leadership, Israel made its victorious entrance into the Promised Land but by the time the second or third generation came along, the ideas and ideals that had once gripped the hearts of the Israelites were gone. In its place were various idolatrous practices.

The dynamic just discussed, often plays out not only on a national scale but in families where, from one generation to the next, there might be a considerable flagging of commitment. One generation might be quite caught up with their religious commitments, but subsequent generations see that fade until, after three or four generations have passed, the original fire is gone.

Question: How does one generation successfully pass its ideals and beliefs on to the next?

Question: Have you ever heard the statement, "God has no grandchildren?" What do you make of it?

Question: What aspects of your culture do you think do not fit the gospel and should be changed?

Question: What aspects of your culture do you think do fit the gospel?

Lesson 12:

What Have they Seen in Your House? ~ June 15-21

Texts for the Week: *Isaiah 38; 39; 1 Cor. 7:12–15; 1 Pet. 3:1, 2; Heb. 6:12; 13:7; 3 John 11; Isa. 58:6, 7, 10, 12.*

Memory Text: “But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9, NKJV).

Opening Question: What can people see in the house of a believer?

The whole lesson this week focuses on the home of a believer and what might been seen there, what ought to be seen there. This is an invitation that invites us to look first at those who are within the house, at what they experience or ought to experience. Then it asks us to contemplate what others who are outside the home might see when they come into it.

First, then, we think about those who are in the house. What do they see? Do they see joy, openness, love, kindness, mutual support or do they see harshness and arbitrariness, selfishness and unkindness? We all know the truth of the saying that children in particular pay more attention to what parents do than to what they say. Of course, if there is a synergy between those two things, the effect is most powerful.

One thing that comes to mind here is the nature of household operations. Is the home very rigid with father or mother asserting authority over all others in the home? This smacks of authoritarianism and it tends, over time, to produce rebellion for nobody likes to be dominated. Certainly, when children are little, they can be dominated, but as they grow up, most refuse to be cowed even by an authoritarian parent. And, as every parent knows, the final arbiter in life is not in their control but is inside each individual person to the point that children will eventually tell the parent how life will be. How much better then, rather than being authoritarian, is the idea that there should be a staged dispersal of authority so the child gains more and more governance of their own life as they grow through the stages of life. When that task is done well, parents end up with adult children who are their friends rather than adults who dislike or even hate each other. And, in this kind of environment, there is the best prospect of belief and religious commitment being transmitted from one generation to the next. Great effort should be undertaken by members of a family to show love and loyalty and selflessness to each other making the pathway through life more pleasant.

ITEM:

- Consider the story of Ruth and Naomi as an example of how beautiful relationships can become. Ruth 1:8-22.

- **Consider the hospitality of Rachel and her household and what the effects of that were.**

One complication that warrants some discussion perhaps, is the issue of marriage to an unbelieving spouse. Sometimes people marry across religious lines with the full knowledge of doing so while on other occasions the difference comes from change made after marriage such as when a spouse converts to another religion. What then? Fortunately, there is some advice to be found in the Scriptures on this:

- 1 Cor. 7:12–15;
- 1 Pet. 3:1, 2.
- Don't walk away from an unbelieving spouse for you might have a very good "sanctifying effect" on them.
- Realize they may walk away from you.
- Lovingkindness, faithfulness, a gentle spirit, selflessness and things like that can go a very long way to making even a home divided by religion a happy place.
- It is advisable to ever keep in mind that a persistent pushing of your beliefs or a persistent complaining about religious difference can destroy a home quite quickly.

Then there is the matter of what people who are not in the hope see. Hopefully, they see a happy and hospitable place. All of us can no doubt think of occasions where we were treated kindly and taken in and even fed. Those occasions linger in our memories as wonderful occasions that tell something about the people who were kind and hospitable. For believer's to be people like that, who are willing to invite others to their homes for a meal, for conversation, for study, are all ways in which those outside the home can benefit from Christian witness. In times past, this was a major means of carrying the gospel to unbelievers especially in those societies that prize hospitality as chief among the social graces. There is no reason to think that does not pertain today.

Questions:

- **If your home is not a place of grace and love, what steps can you take to remedy that situation?**
- **When last did you show hospitality to someone who was not a member of your family?**
- **What could you do to come alongside someone who is struggling due the fact they are married to an unbelieving spouse?**
- **If you are married to an unbeliever, what are your responsibilities and what are your opportunities?**

Lesson 13:

Turning Hearts in the End Time ~June 22-28

Texts for the Week: *Mal. 4:5, 6; Matt. 11:14, 15; 17:10; 1 Kings 16:29–17:24; 1 Kings 18:20–45; Matt. 3:2.*

Memory Text: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And he will turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers; lest I come and smite the earth with a curse” (Malachi 4:5, 6, NKJV).

Opening Question: What will turn the Hearts of People toward God?

We come now to the last lesson of this quarter, one in which we are invited to think about a very significant question: “What will turn the hearts of people toward God?” This question is directly linked to a rather well-known scripture passage in the Book of Malachi where God says that, before the great and terrible Day of the Lord, a prophetic voice will arise – named Elijah in the text – that will focus on turning the hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of the children toward God, all within the context of faith.

Behind this question are a host of events in history past that involve a group of people who have wandered far from God, returning to follow after him. One notable example is the story found in 1 Kings 18:20-45, the story of Elijah up on Mt. Carmel in the show-down with the prophets of Baal. That was a time of great idolatry for the Israelite king had married a pagan wife who had engineered the practice of the fertility religions of her society into the middle of Israelite life. This resulted in a considerable departure from following after the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But there came the day when, by the intent of God, there was to be a day of reckoning when issues of worship would be clearly laid out in a way the people would be confronted with a decision. The place of the showdown was the top of Mt. Carmel where there was a great display put on by various priests who were supposed to prove the ascendancy of Baal who was, after all, the God of thunder and lightning, among other things. But their proceedings, though carried on throughout the day, produced nothing. As the day waned, Elijah stepped in putting a halt to their antics after which he prayed and fire came down from heaven consuming not only the sacrifice but even the stone altar and all the water in the moat around it. There followed a great turning toward God much to the anger of Jezebel, the pagan queen.

We could look also at the experience that unfolded under the preaching and ministry of John the Baptist. For 400 years, there had been prophetic silence. Then, out of the desert, of all places, there came a simple, ordinary peasant who quickly established himself as one who was fearless and blunt. With fire in his eyes, he

announced to the idolatrous world in which he lived that a new era was dawning, that God was going to put the axe to the root of their religious tree to bring it tumbling down. Of course, the message of John was shocking, so shocking that some got angry while others repented and turned to God. In the pages of Scripture, we see that John became a very busy man, preaching and baptizing people as they returned to God.

The memory text for this lesson seems to point to another day, yet in the future, when, before the great and terrible Day of the Lord, there will be another turning toward God, a time when, out of the rank idolatry of the age that is ending, a call from God will be heard that will draw people through repentance toward the rightful worship of God again. When that will be, or how that will be, is not divulged. But it leaves a certain longing in the hearts of believer's to see that day come, to wonder what humans might do to be able to hasten the coming of that day at last.

Questions:

- Do you think it is possible for humans to delay the coming of the Day of the Lord?
- Do you think it is possible for humans to hasten the coming of the Day of the Lord?
- What do you think prevents people from following after God?
- Can you think of a time in your own life when there was perhaps a time when you did not follow God with considerable intention? What brought that about? What caused you to change course, if you did, to follow once again?
- What other times of turning toward God can you think of, that are found in the Bible? What lessons do they have for us?