

RETURN *to the* LORD



LENTEN BIBLE STUDY

PARTICIPANT

2021

SERIES INTRODUCTION

“Return to the Lord your God,” the congregation sings before the Gospel reading to mark the season of Lent. This particular Lenten season, we will focus on God’s historic call to His people to repent and the things that might get in the way of us returning to God. Even if our desire is to return to God, there are many stumbling blocks, not the least of which is ourselves. That is the subject of our Lenten theme this year as we dive into God’s Holy Word and consider carefully the distinct difficulty experienced by the people we encounter in each biblical narrative.

We will also explore in each study how that particular difficulty might be keeping us from returning to God or, equally important, how God may be using that very difficulty to draw us to Him. Whatever the case may be, it is always God’s desire to be our God and for us to be His people (Jeremiah 31:33).

In many ways, this is a very timely study after the whole world experienced a time of plague and social distancing last year during Lent, Holy Week, Easter, and beyond. That holy season was unlike anything we had ever experienced. It was a time when God, during the season of Lent, was clearly calling to us and saying once again, “Return to the Lord your God.” Throughout the Scriptures, God has time and time again called His people Israel back to Him.

It will be interesting, and perhaps also challenging, for us to look back at the COVID-19 outbreak and see ourselves in the place of the biblical people we will be studying. How did we handle things when we didn’t really understand what was going on? Did the event itself, and the challenges and complications it presented in our lives, cause us to draw further away from God or to “return to the Lord our God”?

We will explore and try to answer these questions and many others through these sessions: A Call to Return; Prayer; Betrayal; False Witness; Denial; The Kingdom of God; and The Resurrection and You: Come and See. As we do, we remember in faith to “return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (Joel 2:13).

FEBRUARY 21, 2021

ASH WEDNESDAY: A CALL TO RETURN

SESSION 1

JOEL 1:1–20; 2:11–17

OPENING

*Return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
Joel 2:13*

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

Joel was a prophet in Judah after the reign of King Jehoshaphat... probably in the 800s BC.

1. Read Joel 1:1-4, 19-20. What was going on in Joel's time that led God to speak to His people through this prophet?
2. Read Joel 1:5-13. How then does God speak to this situation?
3. How does that compare with the way we express repentance now?
4. Think about the corporate confession used in Divine Service 1. What is the purpose of such a confession?
5. Read Joel 1:13-15 and 2:11. What is the "day of the LORD," and how is it described?
6. 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 . . ." Read Joel 2:12-14. What is the Lord asking the people to do?

7. Do these words have any application in our lives today?

8. In Joel 2:14, the prophet seems ambiguous but hopeful that God may relent of the destruction. Is God a God of destruction? Is God a God of blessing?

9. What kind of blessing is Joel expecting?

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

11. How do you prepare for worship?

12. How does Joel's call for torn hearts and not just torn garments apply to our worship?

CONCLUSION

Like the locust plague that the people in Joel's time experienced, COVID-19 threatened our lives last year during Lent. This virus sent a scare into the world, which threatened our lives and our livelihoods. Did we make connections to this passage (2:13)? Were you able to hear God calling you to return to Him? Did you heed that call?

In the end, God showed His mercy to His people 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.

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.

FEBRUARY 28, 2021

MIDWEEK LENT 1: RETURN TO PRAYER

SESSION 2

MATTHEW 26:36–44

OPENING

*Return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
Joel 2:13*

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

Communication . . . the lifeblood of all relationships. The Lord God has always desired a relationship with those whom He has created. He has blessed us with different ways of communicating with one another. And He has given us the blessing of being able to communicate with Him, man to God, child to Father, along with the certainty that He is listening. 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.

13. Why is prayer a very important part of having a relationship with God?

14. Read Matthew 26:36-44. What was the point of taking Peter, James, and John farther into the garden with Him?

15. What was Jesus sorrowful and troubled about, specifically?

16. How did Jesus succeed in the Garden of Gethsemane?

17. How did the disciples fail Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane?

18. Was there ever a time when the Lord let you see your weakness so you would rely on his grace?

19. It is necessary in tracking what is going on in this narrative to answer the question, What is God's will? This ought to be handled in two parts. First, what is God's *ultimate* will for all people as His creation?
20. Second, what is God's will for Jesus Christ, His only Son?
21. Jesus asks the disciples to "watch and pray." How are we to understand the word *watch* in this context?
22. Is this related to any instructions to watch that Jesus has given for us to follow? Read Matthew 25:13 (You may need to skim the parable of the 10 Virgins).
23. The prayer is the same. 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?
24. The repetition and persistence in Jesus' prayer is a model for us also. Read 1 Thessalonians 5:17; Ephesians 6:18; Colossians 4:2. What do these passages say about our prayers?

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.

CLOSING

Sing stanza 1 of "Go to Dark Gethsemane" (LSB 436).

- 1 Go to dark Gethsemane,
All who feel the tempter's pow'r;
Your Redeemer's conflict see,
Watch with Him one bitter hour;
Turn not from His griefs away;
Learn from Jesus Christ to pray.

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Pray: The Lord's Prayer

MARCH 7, 2021

MIDWEEK LENT 2: RETURN FROM BETRAYAL

SESSION 3

MATTHEW 26:14–16, 20–25, 47–56

OPENING

*Return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
Joel 2:13*

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).

25. Betrayal is one of the most painful human experiences. Name some ways that betrayal can be perpetrated.

26. Why is betrayal such a damaging sin?

27. Read Matthew 26:14-16, 20-25; John 13:21–30. In what way did Judas's betrayal come about? How did Judas plan his handing over of Jesus?

28. Is Judas really guilty?

29. Read Matthew 26:47-56 and John 18:3-6. Why did Jesus come forward toward Judas and the officers bearing lanterns and torches and weapons?

30. Why did Jesus ask the question, “Whom do you seek?”

31. What is the reaction and posture of the officers when Jesus says, “I am He”?

32. How is this reaction similar to what Paul writes in Philippians 2:10-11? How is it different?

33. The account of Jesus being betrayed by Judas is evocative of Joseph being betrayed by his brothers in Genesis 37. Read Genesis 50:20. How does Joseph’s response to betrayal have a Christological component looking ahead toward Jesus’ betrayal by Judas?

CLOSING

SING STANZAS 1–2 OF “ALAS! AND DID MY SAVIOR BLEED” (*LSB* 437).

1 Alas! And did my Savior bleed,
And did my sov’reign die?
Would He devote that sacred head
For such a worm as I?

2 Was it for crimes that I had done
He groaned upon the tree?
Amazing pity, grace unknown,
And love beyond degree!

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Pray: The Lord’s Prayer

MARCH 14, 2021

MIDWEEK LENT 3: RETURN FROM FALSE WITNESS

SESSION 4

MATTHEW 26:57–68

OPENING

*Return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
Joel 2:13*

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 that they may put Him 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. Then as they attempt to justify their words and actions, they often magnify the blasphemy, resulting in serious damage or complete ruin of another's reputation. This is part of the scene of Jesus' "trial" before Caiaphas, the high priest, and other temple leaders.

34. Read Matthew 26:57-68. What charges are the chief priests seeking to levy against Jesus?
35. Of the false witnesses whose words are recorded in Scripture, two gave testimony against Jesus. What did they say?
36. The high priest stood and asked Jesus for a response. How does Jesus fulfill what was written about Him? Read Isaiah 53:7.
37. His silence is probably enough to convince them of His guilt and that they have Jesus right where they want Him. But in terms of an actual trial, it is not sufficient to convict Jesus of anything. They need Jesus to speak Himself and make some of these claims in their presence. Of course, it would not be just a claim but the truth. The high priest demands, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ" (Matthew 26:63). This connects well to the question that Jesus had asked His disciples earlier and the confession that Peter had given. What was that answer? Read Matthew 16:16.

38. This living God, the Word made flesh dwelling among mankind, God Incarnate, is now facing those who accuse Him falsely of wrongdoing. They question who He is and have only a fleshly understanding of where He came from. Caiaphas is *asking* Jesus to verify this identity as the Christ, the Son of God, rather than making a confession himself that Jesus is indeed God's Son. How does Jesus answer the high priest's question?

39. What is ironic about Caiaphas's inquiry?

40. Consider the 8th Commandment: "**You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.**" How is this Commandment routinely broken by us today?

41. Do we also bear false witness against Jesus? How?

CONCLUSION

It is jarring to us that the sinless Son of God is being tried for crimes He did not commit. 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.

CLOSING

SING STANZA 5 OF "O DEAREST JESUS, WHAT LAW HAST THOU BROKEN" (LSB 439).

5 The sinless Son of God must die in sadness;
The sinful child of man may live in gladness;
Man forfeited his life and is acquitted;
God is committed.

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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.

MARCH 21, 2021

MIDWEEK LENT 4: RETURN FROM DENIAL

SESSION 5

LUKE 22:31–34, 54–62

OPENING

*Return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
Joel 2:13*

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 just far enough behind so as to not be noticed and risk being captured also. He loves the Lord Jesus but perhaps a little less than he loves himself.

42. In Luke 22:31–34, why does Jesus repeat Peter’s (Simon’s) name?

43. What does Satan want with Peter?

44. What is significant about Satan’s request: “*Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat*”? And what was God’s purpose?

45. What did Peter believe about himself? What warning did Jesus give him?

46. What does Jesus mean by “strengthen your brothers”?

47. Read Luke 22:54–62. Peter’s previous boastful words were a bit hasty. How does the meaning of the First Commandment: “We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things,” speak to Peter’s betrayal?
48. 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, though what is going on with Jesus is still the matter of most importance. In what way was Peter “following” Jesus in verse 54? What is ironic about his following?
49. Who was the first one to recognize Peter? What did this person say about him?
50. How did Peter respond the second time he was recognized?
51. The third time came about an hour later—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 insistently say? What was Peter’s response this time? Since time is important in this pericope, what happens next?

CONCLUSION

Things happen very quickly now. 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. With the third denial of his Lord, Peter hears the cock crow. One disappointed look from Jesus jogs Peter’s memory, and he comes undone—running away in tears of shame.

CLOSING

SING STANZA 1 OF “JESUS REFUGE OF THE WEARY” (*LSB* 423).

- 1 Jesus, refuge of the weary,
 Blest Redeemer, whom we love,
 Fountain in life’s desert dreary,
 Savior from the world above:
 Often have Your eyes, offended,
 Gazed upon the sinner’s fall;
 Yet upon the cross extended,
 You have borne the pain of all.

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Pray: The Lord’s Prayer

MARCH 28, 2021

MIDWEEK LENT 5: RETURN TO THE KINGDOM OF GOD

SESSION 6

JOHN 18:12–14, 28–38

OPENING

*Return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
Joel 2:13*

Prayer: Jesus, You are King of kings and Lord of lords. With the Father and the Holy Spirit You have dominion and power over all things. Though You humbled Yourself to become one of us, You were no earthly king, as Your kingdom was not of this world. Thank You that Your life, death, and resurrection have set us free from sin by faith in You and Your promises. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

Read Psalm 24, paying special attention to verses 7–10. The Israelites in the time of Samuel rejected the Lord as their King and sought an earthly king to rule over them like the other nations had. God obliged and gave them earthly kings, for they had long rejected God, His will for His people, and His ways. But this would not thwart God’s plan for our salvation. As we sing in the season of Advent: “The King of kings is drawing near; the Savior of the world is here. Life and salvation He doth bring” (LSB 341:1). This King would be like no other king God’s people had ever known or that the world would ever know after Him. Zechariah prophesied about Jesus: “Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is He, humble and mounted on a donkey” (Zechariah 9:9). Before this was fulfilled, John the Baptizer, the forerunner of Christ, would preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2).

Transition: God became incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ, and the world was not ready for Him. Many Jews were waiting for the Messiah, but because they did not believe in the one who sent Jesus, namely the Father, many also rejected the Son of God, who would carry out the Father’s plan for our salvation. People are still rejecting the Son of God to this very day.

52. Read John 18:12-14, 28-38. The Jews brought Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to Pilate’s house. Why did they not enter Pilate’s house with Jesus?

53. Read John 18:29–30. Pilate demands to know the accusation the Jews were bringing against Jesus. What is their answer to Pilate? Do they give a specific charge?

Transition: Pilate wants no part of this, yet neither can he afford another riot or something similar as he already had too many strikes against him from Rome. In Matthew’s Gospel, we find the ill-famed washing of Pilate’s hands and his words, “I am innocent of this man’s blood, see to it yourself” (Matthew 27:24). In our text from John, Pilate says, “Take Him yourself and judge Him by your own law” (18:31).

54. What was the real reason given for bringing Jesus to Pilate? What did this fulfill?
55. Pilate faced a big dilemma with this situation. His options were limited. His actions seem only to be stalling the inevitable. He returns to speak some more to Jesus. Read John 18:33. What does Pilate ask Jesus this time?
56. What insight does this give us about Pilate's grasp of the situation?
57. Read John 18:34–35. What is the two-part response that Jesus gives Pilate instead of a straight answer? Why does Jesus give His answer to Pilate in this way? What is Pilate's response to Jesus' question?
58. Read John 18:36; 8:23; 15:18–19; 18:19–20. Jesus responds by saying what He has been saying all along. The issue is more about the world accepting the truth. Still stuck in worldly-mindedness, Pilate has his "aha" moment and asks Jesus, "So, You are a king?" (John 18:37). Jesus answers by saying that for this purpose He came into the world. What is the purpose for which Jesus came?

CONCLUSION

Jesus states that He has come to "bear witness to the truth," and that those who are "of the truth" listen to Him. (See also John 10:25–28.) Having grown weary of listening to Jesus talk in such a mysterious way, Pilate dismisses Jesus' silly notions—as he sees them—with the words "What is truth?" (John 18:38). The world still dismisses Jesus with this very question. Read John 1:9–13.

CLOSING

Prayer: Lord Jesus, as the world continues to reject You and dismiss the truth of Your Word, help us, we pray, in the midst of that rejection, to hear the truth with ears and hearts of faith that cling to You as our King of kings. Bless us with perseverance and strength as we face the days ahead until You come again in glory. In Your name we pray. Amen.