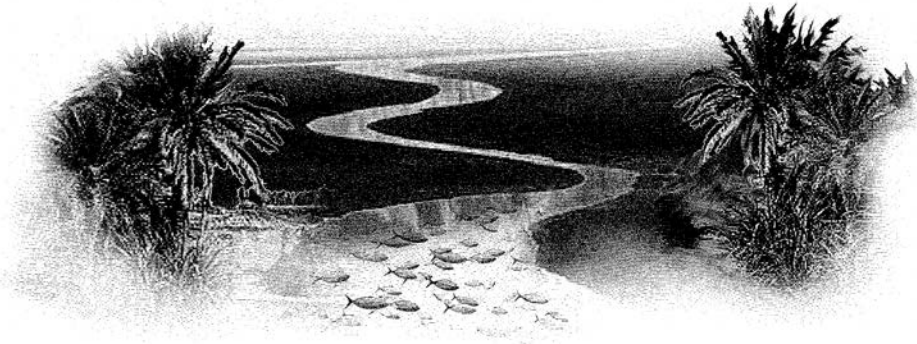


# Justice<sup>1</sup> and Mercy in the Old Testament: Part 2



## SABBATH—JULY 16

**READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON:** Ezekiel 37:1–14; Ephesians 2:10; Ezekiel 47:1–8; Matthew 5:16; Revelation 22:1, 2; Isaiah 61:1–11.

**MEMORY VERSE:** “‘Large numbers of creatures will live where the river flows. It will have huge numbers of fish. This water flows there and makes the salt water fresh. So where the river flows everything will live’ ” (Ezekiel 47:9, NIV).

**A ONCE SUCCESSFUL NEIGHBORHOOD** in the 1950s and early 1960s became a terrible place to live in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Most families moved away, leaving behind many abandoned, run-down, and burned-out apartments. Businesses moved out, and drugs and crime moved in.

In 1986, a Christian family left their comfortable home in a good neighborhood and moved into this run-down community. A pastor from another city joined them. They rebuilt two burned-out buildings and made them their homes. The two families spent time in the streets, meeting with community groups and mixing with those who remained in the area. These two families were the agents (helpers) God used to begin a church that brought healing and change to this dead community. Their work and impact continues today. They made a big difference in many lives there.

God has something to say about the work of His church in “hopeless” situations such as this. Our lesson this week continues the study of Old Testament verses that call upon God’s people to show His character (thoughts; feelings; actions) of kindness to the world.

## DEFINITIONS

1. justice—the process or result of using laws to fairly judge and punish crimes and criminals.

## ALIVE IN CHRIST (Ezekiel 37:1–14)



The bones came to life and stood on their feet—a vast army. In the same way, God revives His people to be a light to the nations.

## DEFINITIONS

2. grace—God’s gift of mercy and forgiveness that He freely gives us to take away our sins.
3. prophecies—to announce that something will happen in the future.
4. revived—to be made strong, healthy, or active again.
5. mission—a task or job that someone is given to do.

Ezekiel 37 clearly shows how God’s grace<sup>2</sup> brings new life to those who are dead in sin. In vision, the prophet (special messenger from God) Ezekiel is carried by the Spirit to a valley full of dead, dry, and scattered bones. These bones are a symbol (word-picture) of the whole house of Israel. God asks Ezekiel, “Son of man, can these bones live?” (Ezekiel 37:3).

The answer to this question opens up as the prophet prophesies<sup>3</sup> to the bones.

**Read Ezekiel 37:1–14. What was God going to do for His people?**

Here are the results of the message delivered to the dry bones: (1) they “came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army” (Ezekiel 37:10, NIV); (2) God will settle His people in their own land (Ezekiel 37:14); (3) the people will know that it was God who did it (Ezekiel 37:14).

But being revived<sup>4</sup> is not enough. God’s people are revived for a mission,<sup>5</sup> for a purpose. Israel was to be a light to the nations.

**Read Ephesians 2:10. Why are we made alive—spiritually re-created—in Christ?**

“Our acceptance with God is sure only through His beloved Son. Good works are the result of the working of His sin-pardoning love. So, our good works are no credit to us. We deserve no reward for our good works. We cannot claim that good works have earned us a part in the salvation of our souls. Salvation is God’s free gift to the believer. It is given to him or her for Christ’s sake alone.

“But are good works of no real value? How does God think of the sinner who sins every day without punishment? Does God think of this person the same way as the one who through faith in Christ tries to live a pure life? The Bible answers, ‘God made us. He created us to belong to Christ Jesus. Now we can do good things. Long ago God prepared them for us to do’ (Ephesians 2:10, NIV).

“In His plan, through His own kindness, the Lord has prepared that good works shall be rewarded. We are accepted through Christ’s own mercy. The acts of mercy, the acts of love, which we do, are the fruits of faith.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 3, pages 199, 200.

## A FLOWING RIVER (Ezekiel 47:1–8)

**Read Ezekiel 47:1–8. What is going on with the temple that Ezekiel sees in vision?**

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The temple appears to be leaking. You may wonder, did a pipe break, or what? In this case, the leak is a good thing.

This water leaking out of the temple is going “toward the east.” East of Jerusalem is the Salt Sea (also known as the Dead Sea). It is the lowest body of water on earth. Between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea is about 21 miles (about 34 kilometers) of largely desert country. This country includes the Arabah, which is the low-lying area of land between the Jordan and the Dead Sea. That sea itself is so salty that nothing can live there.

But when the water from the temple reaches it, the dead waters of the sea are “healed.” This act of healing can be understood as a symbol of how God’s church, the temple, works to heal the world (1 Peter 2:4, 5). This church is reaching out and offering health and healing to those dead in sin.

**Read Matthew 5:16. What is Jesus saying to us about how we are to represent Him to the world?**

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The Zambezi River in Zambia, Africa, starts as a shallow brook that comes from under a tree. As it flows toward Victoria Falls, it grows from a brook (ankle deep) to become knee deep, and then to waist deep, and then into a river that is deep enough to swim in. In the same way, the river from the temple was small at the beginning. But it grew in speed and power and became a river “deep enough to swim in—a river that no one could cross” (Ezekiel 47:5, NIV).

Your church’s healing influence may start small, but it can grow until it changes your community! “Our work has been shown to me in its beginning as a small, very small, creek.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*<sup>6</sup> for the Church, volume 7, page 171.

**Light and water—both of these are symbols used to talk about what God can do through us to help others. How can we grow to serve those in need better?**

**DEFINITIONS**

6. *Testimonies*—the writings of Ellen G. White.

## THE CHURCH: A GIVER OF LIFE (Ezekiel 47:9)



**Ezekiel's prophecy shows that where the river that comes from God's church flows, there is life.**

## DEFINITIONS

7. prophecy—an announcement of what will happen in the future.

8. compare—show how two or more things are the same or different.

9. wholistic—relating to or concerned with complete systems rather than with individual parts.

**“Large numbers of creatures [living things] will live where the river flows. It will have huge numbers of fish. . . . Where the river flows everything will live” (Ezekiel 47:9, NIV).**

Ezekiel's prophecy<sup>7</sup> shows that where the river that comes from God's church flows, there is life. Ezekiel 47:10 adds to the wonder of it all. Here is a body of water where no fish can live. But it becomes a place where fishermen on the banks are casting their nets to catch many fish. The point is that through the power of God working in His people, there is life where before there was none.

“Where God is at work there is no hopeless situation. There is no group of people who cannot be saved, no history from an unhappy past which will curse us to a hopeless future.”—Adapted from *The Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956), volume 6, page 328.

God's grace does wonderful things for anyone who will accept it. Here, we have the gospel message. Through us, God can give hope to the discouraged, depressed, dry, and dying, both spiritually and physically.

**Compare<sup>8</sup> Ezekiel 47:12 with Revelation 22:1, 2. What do these verses tell you about the future of those who are healed and made alive by Jesus through His church?**

God's people include community members God has healed and made alive through the unselfish work of church members. One day all these people will be together in the new earth, where the river flows from God's throne. There will be no deserts, dryness, or death there.

We must wait for that blessed future to arrive. But while we wait, God wants His churches to be places that give healing and full life to the community. He wants to work through us to bring back life and to change hearts that are deserts, lifeless plains, and Dead Seas. He wants to give people full life in Jesus (John 10:10). He plans to do this work through us as we live out in our lives the truth of the wholistic<sup>9</sup> Adventist message.

**Amos gives the same picture as Ezekiel 47. Read Amos 5:24. How does this picture compare with your church's community work? How is your church a healing river?**



### JUBILEE<sup>10</sup> PROMISES (Proverbs 8:32–36)

The Old Testament is filled with the idea that those who have been blessed with successful and spiritual lives will reach out to those who have not been so blessed.

**Read Isaiah 61:1–11. What is God saying to His people here? How can we make good use of it for ourselves and for others? Read also Luke 4:18.**

Isaiah 61 begins with an announcement. It says that the Spirit of the Lord works through the Chosen One (Jesus). With the Spirit's help, Jesus preaches good news to the poor. He encourages those whose hearts have been broken. He preaches freedom to the slaves of sin. He sets free the prisoners from darkness and hopelessness (Isaiah 61:1). These promises are to be fulfilled in the "year of the LORD's favor." The "year of the LORD's favor" also means the year of jubilee, which we learned about in lesson 3. The year of jubilee also takes care of ministering to (serving) the needs of the poor.

So, the mourners are comforted. The grieving ones in Israel are cared for. There are those who receive "beautiful crowns on their heads in place of ashes" and "oil" that gives "them gladness instead of sorrow." There are also those who wear "a spirit of praise in place of a spirit of sadness" (Isaiah 61:3, NIV). They are the very ones who will rebuild the ancient (very old) ruins and restore<sup>11</sup> the places long destroyed. Those blessed by the Messianic<sup>12</sup> jubilee become changers of society. They renew the ruined cities (Isaiah 61:4). God's servants are called priests and ministers (co-workers with Christ) and are supported by the wealth of the surrounding nations (Isaiah 61:5, 6).

In Isaiah 61, we find examples of God's Chosen One changing groups of people living near Israel. These groups are changed through the work of God's people who are faithful to Him (Isaiah 61:8, 9). God promises to do the same work today through those who have been called to be ministers and missionaries in communities around the world. Should we not feel the same changing influence of this prophecy? Should we not feel it as greatly as the Lord's blessing on us? Should we not feel its blessing as we stand clothed in robes of salvation and righteousness (holiness) in our community (Isaiah 61:10, 11)?

**Read Isaiah 61:9. What a powerful testimony (evidence or proof) to what God could do for His people. Could the same thing be said about us today? Why, or why not?**



**The Old Testament teaches that those who have been blessed with successful and spiritual lives will reach out to those who have not been so blessed.**

#### DEFINITIONS

10. jubilee—a special anniversary; also a special celebration at the time of such an anniversary.

11. restore—to return something to an earlier or original (first) condition by repairing it, cleansing it, and so on.

12. Messianic—of or about Christ.

## THE CHURCH—AN AGENT OF CHANGE (Micah 6)

**Read Micah 6. What is the Lord speaking out against here?**

Micah joins the other Old Testament prophets who warn against religion that lacks justice and mercy. Such religion is never acceptable to a fair and merciful God.

**What is the important message of Micah 6:8?**

“True religion is useful. To be sure, it includes the services of the church. But . . . it also is more important to share food with the hungry than it is to fast. Useful godliness is the only kind of religion accepted at the judgment bar [courtroom] of God (Matthew 25:34–46).”—Adapted from *The SDA Bible Commentary*, volume 4, page 306.

Today, God still refuses to accept religion that does not practice what it believes. The true religion that God accepts is found in Micah 6:8. Our religious practices are not goals in and of themselves. Instead, they help us to reach the ideal (perfect example) of Christ in us.

In the introduction to this week’s lesson, we met two families who moved into a “hopeless” neighborhood in order to minister to (serve) the needs of the people. The two families formed a small group in one of their living rooms with new friends from the neighborhood. The members of this growing small group sincerely prayed that God would show them how to bring back life to their community. They partnered with a Christian development company. Then they began asking volunteers to join them in rebuilding the run-down apartments around them.

If you visited this community today, you would find a successfully growing new community doing so much better than before. This success became real because a small church wanted to show Jesus’ love in a useful way. This desire to serve changed their community. Their work shows a very useful and powerful way in which Christ could work through His people to reach out and minister to others.

**God was speaking to His people as a group. But in Micah 6:8 the “you” means one person. God was talking to each one personally. How well do you, as one person, show what the Lord says here “is good”?**



**“It is more important to share food with the hungry than it is to fast.”**

**ADDITIONAL THOUGHT:** Read Jeremiah 22:1–16; Ezekiel 16:49; Zechariah 7:9, 10. Read Ellen G. White Comments, pages 1165, 1166 in *The SDA Bible Commentary*, volume 4; “God’s Design in Our Sanitariums,”<sup>13</sup> pages 227, 228 in *Testimonies for the Church*, volume 6.

“The LORD has shown you what is good. He has told you what he requires of you. You must treat people fairly. You must love others faithfully. And you must be very careful to live the way your God wants you to” (Micah 6:8, NIV). How much clearer could the Lord be about what He asks of His people? God has shown us what is “good.” And this “good” is the same word used again and again in Genesis 1 about the pre-Fall Creation. So, God brings our minds back to the ideal, to what He first had planned for us. At the same time, He tells us what He will restore to us after Jesus returns. The wording translated as “require of you” could also be translated as “seek from you.” That is, what does God “seek from [expect of]” us, who are His saved people covered by the grace of Christ? The answer is shown in how we are to relate to others and to God. First, we are to *act justly* (fairly and honestly). We can help those who are helpless victims of injustice. Second, we are to *love mercy*. We live in a world that can be unmerciful. What a powerful witness we could be were we to love mercy and show that love by sharing mercy with others. Third, we are to *walk humbly before God*. The Lord in Micah 6:4 pointed His people back to their freedom from Egypt as a reason for them to be humble and faithful before Him. How much more so should we, then, be humble? We have been saved by the blood of Jesus. The real cost of the Cross should always keep us humble before God.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① What other Old Testament verses can you find that talk about our responsibility to the needy?
- ② In Amos 5, especially verses 21–24, we find strong words about the religious people in the time of Amos. We find that God is more interested in how others are treated than in the religious services that He Himself set up. What does this fact tell us about what should be important for us as Christians?
- ③ How can we guard against the danger of getting so caught up in reaching out to help people with everyday things that we miss their spiritual needs? How can we balance the two?

### DEFINITIONS

13. sanitariums—places for the care and treatment of people who are recovering from illnesses or who have diseases that will last a long time.