FOSTER THE CITY

God's heart for *Yātôm*

An 8-week Small Group Study

What does the Bible actually say about the orphan?

Can you imagine doing a 43 piece puzzle with only 1-2 pieces? Even if those two pieces each had intricate details and key elements of the greater picture in them, they are most impactful when put together with the remaining 41. It's preposterous to believe that less than 5% of the pieces fully reflect the complete picture of the puzzle, yet this is often the mindset Christians have when it comes to God's thoughts about vulnerable children. What would it look like for us to expand our imagination beyond one or two pieces of the puzzle? Let's go looking for the rest of the pieces in order to see the beautiful picture of God's heart for the fatherless!

So let's start in the Old Testament - the place where the vast majority of references to the fatherless are found! The truth is, James 1:27 is the only place in the New Testament where orphans are explicitly mentioned. When you compare this one reference to the 42 mentions of the orphan in the Old Testament, it becomes clear that the vast majority of the Bible's teaching comes from the Hebrew Scriptures. 42 times in the Old Testament God reveals his heart towards children who do not have a home. 42 times God provides the insight and perspective we need to care for these amazing children. To have any hope of truly understanding God's heart for vulnerable children, we must no longer neglect the truth these passages have to offer.

For the next several weeks we will open the Bible together and start gathering the missing pieces of the puzzle in hopes that we better align ourselves with the heart of God. And we know that as we are more aligned with His heart, we will be moved toward those who are so close to His heart!

When we study the Bible, it is helpful to look at the meanings of key words, for it often offers greater insights to the topic. The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew. Most English translations use the words 'fatherless' and 'orphan' to describe children who need a home. But when you look at the Hebrew text, we learn that both English words 'fatherless' and 'orphan' are translated from the single Hebrew word, yātôm [ya-TOME]. Yātôm is a common word occurring 42 times in the Old Testament. What is interesting - and very insightful - about the word yātôm is that it is constructed around the Hebrew verb meaning 'to be lonely.' One would expect the word to mean something like 'to be without parents.' Yet in the Hebrew mind, to be an orphan is to be lonely.

This small insight offers profound wisdom to help navigate the needs of adoptive children and kids in foster care. Heartbreakingly, there is a cold isolation and loneliness that many children in foster care experience. Even once children find an adoptive home, the experience and trauma of being removed from their birth family never completely goes away.

Recently, an adoptive mom shared how her teenage adopted daughter expressed how isolating it was to be the only adoptee among her peers. This experience left her feeling like she was the only one who didn't belong in the group. Another adoptive mom shared how, after her 4-year-old daughter's birth

mom's parental rights were terminated, she sat in her lap crying out, "Tummy Mommy!" Even though this precious little girl was actively being held by her forever mom, somewhere deep down inside, she still felt alone.

These stories aren't shared to be fatalistic or hopeless, but rather to help us understand what it might feel like to be one of these precious, vulnerable children. One of the most beautiful (and one of the most quoted) passages about yātôm says, we serve a God who is "a father to the fatherless." A "God [who] sets the lonely in families" (Psalm 68:5-6). These stories are shared to highlight the brilliance of Hebrew wisdom, and the tenderness of God's heart toward these children. The very word yātôm gives deep insight and direction on how to best love children who are without a family; to love them is to be present with them in their loneliness. As we come to correctly understand the unique experience of yātôm, it serves as a safeguard against thinking there is an easy answer to meeting the needs of adoptive children and children in foster care. It teaches that yātôm's very experience has been marked by loneliness, and what they need most is for God's people to be with them. God calls his people to be the embodied presence of Christ - a presence that stands with yātôm through their best and worst days.

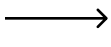
Pray

Father, we thank you for the richness of all of Scripture, that it is God-breathed, Holy Spirit-inspired, and so incredibly practical when it comes to understanding your heart for yātôm. Thank you Lord for welcoming us into your family with such lavish love! We long to better understand how we as your Church can be a home for the lonely. Teach us how to be mother, father, sister, or brother to those that you see and long to bring into a new kind of family— a true kind of family. Give us compassion and understanding for the experience of these precious children–compassion that leads us into action in the power of your Spirit!

Reflect

How has God met you in times of isolation and loneliness? How does that inform the way you see yātôm?





Honest truths for hardened hearts

As we pointed out in our last session, the most common verses that Bible teachers use to talk about God's heart for the fatherless are Psalm 68:5-6 and James 1:27. But the Bible - especially the Old Testament - is full of passages that disclose God's heart for the fatherless. We also highlighted that the Hebrew word translated 'fatherless' or 'orphan' is yātôm [ya-TOME]. Today, we are going to bring a handful of additional puzzle pieces to the table.

All of us come to the Scriptures with a certain set of assumptions, and you might have a set of assumptions about God's heart for the fatherless. One of those assumptions could be that when God talks about the fatherless in Scripture, he does so primarily with soft, warm, empathic language. Perhaps one image that comes to mind is Jesus welcoming sweet little children to gather around while he told happy and engaging stories about his Heavenly Father, truly one of the most delightful Gospel stories! However, as you dive into the Old Testament, you might be surprised at what you find.

Instead of warm, welcoming language towards children, there is harsh, wrathful language towards those who oppress the fatherless. In fact, the first mention of yātôm in the Old Testament is a strong warning that anyone who mistreats the widow or orphan will experience the curse and wrath of God.

"You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless." - Exodus 22:22-24

Let's be honest, this seems like a difficult passage to square with the loving and gracious character of God. In Exodus 22 God is threatening to kill those who oppress yātôm. And in a tragic - and somewhat ironic - reversal of judgment, oppression of the widow and orphan results in a widowed spouse and fatherless children. Now that doesn't seem very loving, does it? What about grace and forgiveness? Surely this verse is a one-of-a-kind outlier! Right?

The reality is that Exodus 22:22-24 is not merely a fringe verse that is unsupported by the rest of Scripture. It actually represents the most prominent theme about yātôm in the entire Bible. The most common idea about yātôm in the Bible is that those who oppress the vulnerable will be judged and cursed by God.

Pause now to read each of the following verses from your Bible:

- Deuteronomy 27:19
- Isaiah 10:1-3
- Jeremiah 5:28-29; 22:1-5
- Zechariah 7:4-14
- Malachi 3:1-5

These are a few of the many passages in the Bible where God promises to bring judgment and curses on those who oppress yātôm. When it comes to children in need of protection, God's love is fierce!

At this point, some might be wanting to run back to the warm and softer verses about God setting the lonely in families (which he does!), but if God's warnings to the oppressor are disregarded, not only will we have an incomplete picture of God's heart for yātôm, but oppression against vulnerable children will increase. Maybe, just maybe, if the full picture of God's wrath against the oppressor was still taught today, fewer children would be abused and neglected by those God tasked to protect them.

God is a good Father and he does not ignore the cries of his children, nor does he turn a blind eye to the injustices inflicted upon them. God will bring judgment on those who oppress yātôm because of His overwhelming love for them.

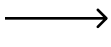
Pray

Prayer: Father, I confess that I have been a bystander at times and overlooked the cries of the vulnerable. Forgive me, Father, and soften my heart. Give me eyes to see, hands that are open, and feet that are quick to move when you call. I long for justice for the oppressed, and do not want to seek first my own comfort but to seek first your kingdom. Loving Father, teach me how to be hospitable and better understand what you are inviting me to do.

Reflect

Reflection: This is a heavier topic and hard to receive. Take some time to sit with the Holy Spirit and simply listen. It may be helpful to say, "Speak Lord, I am listening." Then give some time to hear from Him.





Piecing Together Theme #1:

God will bring judgment on those who oppress yātôm

There are several things we can glean from this first theme. Here are four brief thoughts:

1. God takes mistreatment of yātôm seriously. For those who have been called to teach the Bible or speak on behalf of yātôm, we invite you to reexamine the tone in which you communicate God's heart for the fatherless. If only soft, flowery language is used, we are misrepresenting God. The primary voice God uses in speaking on behalf of yātôm is not gentle language towards children, but aggressive warnings for those who oppress.

2. God will make right the injustice towards yātôm. Those involved in child welfare have seen terrible evils done to children and youth in foster care. Like the prophet Habakkuk, sometimes our hearts cry out to God: "Why do the wicked prosper!?" "Why do you allow abusers to harm children?" Though we will never have a satisfactory answer until we meet God face to face, we choose to take comfort in knowing that God is a righteous judge and he does not let evil go unpunished. All sin done towards children is either dealt with at the cross or paid in full through the judgment of God.

3. It is ok to be angry at oppression. In some circles of Christianity, anger is explicitly (or implicitly) seen as sin. However, the Bible teaches that there is a way to be angry without sinning (Eph 4:26). Knowing that God regularly expresses anger towards the oppressor gives us freedom to express our own anger towards the pain that foster and adoptive kids have endured. As followers of Jesus, injustice should make us angry! And like Jesus we should do whatever we can to stop oppression against the poor (Matt 21:12-14). Expressing anger - especially through the discipline of lament - can be a powerful tool in processing the vicarious suffering that comes with caring for children and youth in foster care.

4. We can love (even the oppressor) because God has promised to bring justice. Romans 12:19 says, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God," for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." Jesus' radical call for disciples to practice loving our enemies only makes sense because "vengeance is mine... says the Lord." There is a great temptation to hate or wish evil on those who oppress children. But God, the righteous judge, judges with total perfection. This truth frees God's people from the need to practice imperfect judgment towards the wicked and instead seek the Spirit's help to love our enemies. Rest assured that God "will by no means clear the guilty" (Ex 34:7).

What a powerful reality we have just unpacked together. The number one theme in the Bible regarding yātôm is an assurance that God loves vulnerable children enough to bring judgment on those who oppress them. However, there is much more as we continue to discover additional pieces of the puzzle that we need to collect in order to have a full understanding of God's heart for yātôm.

Pray

Father, the pain and affliction of defenseless children make me angry and anguished. This shouldn't happen! You are allowing my heart to break for what breaks yours. Sometimes these emotions feel overwhelming to hold, yet may they always lead me back to You. Please be just. Please put an abrupt stop to these vicious cycles of neglect and abuse. We know you see all things and have wisdom that far surpasses my own. I cry out to you for help on behalf of these young victims. I plead the blood of Jesus over their lives. Amen.

Reflect

In what areas of my life do I need to release the outcomes to God? What areas of my life do I need to take to the Father in lament, instead of gripping tightly to control? If you find you need more time with this practice, consider using this Prayer Retreat resource to guide you through lament.

You are being lied to (AKA: The truth about who is truly blessed)

By way of review, we discovered that the first theme revealed that the number one use of the word yātôm in the Hebrew Scriptures is that God will bring judgment on those who oppress yātôm – the basic idea being that God loves yātôm enough to protect them. In light of this, what do you think is the second most common use of the word yātôm?

Contrary to the ideology of millions, the blessed life is NOT found in wealth and a life of ease and comfort. It is found – at least in part – by caring for yātôm. Listen to the promise of Deuteronomy 14:28-29:

"At the end of every three years you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in the same year and lay it up within your towns. And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do."

Israel was instructed to bring a yearly tithe to the central sanctuary. This money was used to support the ongoing work of the Levites. However, "every third year, the tithe was to be stored in the Israelite's own town or village to provide a charitable fund for the needy, the Levites, the resident aliens, the widows, the orphans" [Thompson, J. A. (1974). Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary (Vol. 5, pp. 199–200). InterVarsity Press]. How beautiful is this?! Every three years God called each local community to replenish a food bank to provide relief and support for the most vulnerable. The heart behind the project was to see that the poor "shall come and eat and be filled." I love this simple yet profound threefold vision of caring for the vulnerable: come, eat, be filled. 'Come' speaks of invitation, intimacy and relationship. 'Eat' speaks of sacrifice, love, attention and care. 'Be filled' speaks of connection, joy, support and hope.

These three words somehow get to the heart of every foster and adoptive parent. Each one who sought out and welcomed children into their home – 'come.' Then sacrificed, loved and nourished that child from the inside out – 'eat.' All for the sake of seeing them connected, whole, known and hopeful – 'be filled.'

And what is God's incentive for such work? Why should people disadvantage themselves for the disadvantaged? "That the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do." As it turns out, the blessed life is not found in money, fame or exotic experiences. The blessed life is found in obeying the Lord and caring for the marginalized. And the people who do so – as Deuteronomy 26:12-15 teaches – can pray with full confidence "look down from your holy habitation, from heaven, and bless your people Israel."

God's blessing is NOTHING like the world's. The shallow and empty promise of finding happiness in success only leaves you wanting more. God's blessing is something other-worldly. It is the deep, soul-satisfying joy of being with God in the work He is doing. It is the permanent joy of God's presence. It is the abiding knowledge that we are loved by God. There is nothing like getting a front-row seat to God's redemptive work in the life of yātôm.

God's blessing is also experienced in dark moments. In times of trouble, sorrow and difficulty, God is a refuge and an ever present help. The blessing of God is felt with particular warmth by those who care for yātôm in the midst of their darkness. God is with yātôm, and his presence is felt by all who obey his command to care for the fatherless. Support Friends, Advocates and Foster Families alike will be the first to testify that God indeed will bless those who care for the fatherless.

Pray

Lord, may the lies and ideologies of this world about what it means to be "blessed" be rejected. I confess that I have so often been wooed by the world's definition of what it means to be blessed. Sanctify my imagination, that I might see your perspective, and lay down my life for the sake of others. I ask that you would lead your people, starting with me, to return to what is sacred and true — the blessing found in obeying your commands to care for yātôm. Shape our hearts to value what you value and to walk in faithful obedience to your Word. Amen.

Reflect

Why should people disadvantage themselves for the disadvantaged?
Ask the Holy Spirit to impress someone or a specific group of people that He would like you to invite into your life. Then, what is a sacrifice that He is inviting you to make that could lead to joy for the receiver and you as the giver?

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The promise that makes all the difference

Ready for a guessing game? Read the following verses about yātôm from the Bible and try to guess what this week's theme is. Ready? Here they are:

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. – Deuteronomy 10:17–18

But you [the Lord] do see, for you note mischief and vexation, that you may take it into your hands; to you the helpless commits himself; you have been the helper of the fatherless. – Psalm 10:14

Sing to God, sing in praise of his name… A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families, he leads out the prisoners with singing. – Psalm 68:4–6

The Lord watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow. – Psalm 146:9

Were you able to identify the theme running through all four of these passages? All four of these texts – and many others like them – strongly communicate that God himself provides for and defends yātôm. God himself is the one who executes justice for, helps, sustains and fathers the fatherless. He is the one watching over them, fighting for their well-being and guarding their every step as they walk through life.

There is profound significance in how this third theme connects with the previous two. The first theme is a warning from God, "If you mess with my kids, I will mess with you." The second theme is an invitation from God, "If you bless my kids, I will bless you." But the third theme is a promise from God, "No matter if people oppress or bless, I will protect and defend the fatherless." It is a beautiful promise that reveals the deep nature of God's compassionate heart. God hates watching yātôm suffer, and in time he will bring them justice and provide what they need.

For those who care for yātôm, there is incredible assurance in the doctrine of God's love for yātôm. It inspires us to keep pressing into this work that is so close to the heart of God. It gives us strength to keep going. The reality is, there is so much brokenness in our child welfare system. Children and youth in foster care have seen the worst humanity has to offer, and if their restoration was solely dependent on us, we would be crushed. It is a burden too great for any human. But if God is at work among the lives of yātôm, if he is the one ultimately providing for and defending these amazing children, then we have the greatest ally anyone could ever hope for. Hallelujah! If the ruling, reigning Christ is on the side of children and youth in foster care, that is a team worth joining. That is a task worthy of our labor of loving sacrifice.

The doctrine of God's love for yātôm is far from being an excuse to disengage, it is an invitation to partner with God. The one who says, "Well, if God loves yātôm, then I don't need to," misunderstands the means by which God cares for the fatherless. Yes, God can and does directly provide for and defend yātôm himself. But even more often he works on the hearts and souls of men and women of faith, calling them to be his hands and feet. God primarily cares for and defends yātôm by animating the church to act on his behalf. The Church is God's holy ambassadors, sent out by the father to care for those he loves and protects. God's people are called to move towards yātôm in the name of Jesus, for the sake of God's glory (Matt 5:16). What an incredible invitation God has given us to co-redeem with Him in His work in this world!

The only reason to say "yes" to being a foster parent is that as a child of God you have personally encountered the unconditional and sacrificial love of God through Christ. An encounter with the love of Jesus changes everything! It is because God has placed his love deep inside your heart that you have love to give to the children who are experiencing foster care. You don't have to be a foster parent to do foster care. Everyone can do something. What is God inviting you to do?

May all those involved in caring for yātôm love and lead from a place of confidence knowing that God himself cares for and defends the fatherless. Rest assured knowing that God himself is the one who sets the lonely in families. Confidence doesn't lie in your own ability to save and to heal. It lies with the King of kings and Lord of lords. It lies with the Great Physician, the ultimate Father to the fatherless and Defender of the vulnerable. God's people are free to serve and love and care and give knowing that at the end of the day, it is God who brings the increase (1 Cor 3:7) and it will be God who gets the glory.

Pray

Father, thank you that you are the ultimate Defender of the fatherless. Lord, give justice to your children and continue to provide for them. May you give us the eyes to see the ways we can work alongside you to provide for these precious children. You alone strengthen and equip us to do your work. Oh what a joy it is to do your will! Help us realign our hearts to what you have called us to do.

Reflect

In what ways have I already experienced God linking arms with me? How is God calling me to deeper levels of faith in Him?

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Don't forget where you came from

The pain of our past is often the door to our future. This was just as true for ancient Israel as it was for Simba in Disney's movie, *The Lion King*. Simba, in a moment of vulnerability, confesses that it is painful to remember his father's death. And Rafiki, without skipping a beat, responds by saying, "Yes, the past can hurt, but the way I see it you can either run from it or learn from it." This sage insight is just what Simba needed to realize he was the rightful King of Pride Rock and it was time for him to return and take back his kingdom from the evil rule of Scar.

What happened in this scene has been played out in a thousand movies and sung out in a thousand songs. It is the pivotal moment when a character understands that the hardship of their past is not something to run from, it is something to learn from. The basic message of these profound moments can be simply summarized in the common expression, "don't forget where you came from."

This week we arrive at theme #4 which is that God calls his people to do justice towards yātôm because they too were helpless as slaves in Egypt (Deut 16:12; 24:18, 22). Here, we see God reminding Israel, "Don't forget where you came from." God expects Israel to love and care for the fatherless because they themselves were in desperate need of defense and protection while slaves in Egypt. Listen to how the following passage from the book of Deuteronomy puts it:

"You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless, or take a widow's garment in pledge, but you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this." - Deuteronomy 24:17-18

God redeemed Israel from their helpless state as slaves in Egypt. He listened to their cry for help and responded in compassion. Israel, more than anyone else, should empathize with the powerless and the oppressed because they were once in the exact same state. God's love for his people is not only a blessing to be received, it is an action to be imitated. Being loved by God is a transformative experience that leads to action! When you are loved by God, you are changed by God. As God loves you, you learn to love others. And as God abides in you, you have the love of God to give away.

Because of this, God expected - even demanded! - that Israel would follow His lead and take concrete steps to care for the yātôm among them. The Lord even gave detailed instructions in Deuteronomy 24:19-22 about how to harvest grain and gather produce in a way that nourished and provided for the vulnerable within the community.

It is precisely because Israel was helpless and hungry in their bondage that they are now to be generous and compassionate in their freedom. And this "don't forget where you came from" theme is not only found in the Hebrew Scriptures; it carries on throughout the whole Bible.

In the Gospels when Jesus would heal, bless, redeem, and forgive, he would often turn to his disciples and say, "go and do likewise" (Mt 6:14; Lk 10:37). And the apostle Paul exhorted the church in Ephesus, "Be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" (Eph 5:1-2). It is because Christ has given himself up for us that we are called to give ourselves away to others.

For followers of Jesus, foster care and adoption are simply a response to what God has done for us! Christians are the ones who were spiritually orphaned, yet now have been adopted by God into his family. Since God so graciously brought us into his family, we are called to open our homes to children who need a family.

The call to "not forget where you came from" has two significant applications that help to fortify and strengthen those who care for children and youth in foster care. First, it creates empathy. Followers of Jesus know firsthand the experience of being vulnerable and defenseless, in need of defenders and advocates. Jesus, the great mediator, came to rescue and speak on our behalf. It is only through the work and love of Christ that Christians have been reunited with God the Father in heaven. Second, it prevents believers from feeling superior. The "savior complex" temptation is real. It is easy to feel like foster parents and advocates are the heroes of the social welfare story. But "not forgetting where you came from" provides the sobering and needed perspective that apart from Christ we can do nothing (John 15:5)! Every righteous impulse and kind act is simply the kingdom of God breaking out of a life submitted to Christ.

Pray

Father, thank you that we have the opportunity to abide in you every day. May we not forget where we have come from and what was purchased for us through Jesus. Let our hearts break for what breaks yours. Let us not become boastful about our contributions in serving others. Father, may you get the glory every step of the way. What a privilege it is to make a difference, big or small, in the lives of these children. It is all for your glory!

Reflect

What parts of my story enable me to empathize with yātôm?

How then shall we live?

We have been studying the Hebrew word yātôm, translated into English as 'orphan' or 'the fatherless' to discover a fuller picture of what the Bible actually says about God's heart for the fatherless. As we have studied how the Hebrew Scriptures use the word yātôm, four key themes have risen to the surface. And each theme has contributed greater clarity to the beautiful picture of God's heart for vulnerable children:

Theme #1: God will bring judgment on those who oppress yātôm.
Theme #2: God will bring blessing on those who protect and care for yātôm.
Theme #3: God himself provides for and defends yātôm.
Theme #4: God calls his people to do justice towards yātôm because they, too, were helpless as slaves in Egypt.

This week we will look at the last key theme regarding God's heart for the fatherless. As you will soon discover, we believe it is a powerful way to finish our study on the Hebrew word yātôm.

Jeremiah 7, often called "Jeremiah's Temple Sermon," is one of those passages that is fundamental for those who desire to know the Bible! Unlike most sermons in our day, Jeremiah 7 is not a warm, upbeat and encouraging message of hope. Rather, it is a word of warning that God's people need to amend their ways or the Lord will bring judgment on the people and remove His presence from the temple.

God's core problem with Israel in Jeremiah 7 is their hypocrisy. Throughout the week, Israel would commit grave injustice and idolatry. Then they would head to the temple to sing worship songs and offer sacrifices as if everything was cool between them and God. Jeremiah's task was to announce a message of warning and potential judgment on the people if they did not repent of their injustice and idolatry and turn to practice justice and righteousness.

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel... "For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever." - Jeremiah 7:5–7

God's problem with Israel was they were living a double life. On the Sabbath they would sing songs to the Lord, then on the weekends they would oppress the poor. One minute they are offering ritual sacrifices, but the next they are taking advantage of the widow and orphan. God had had enough. The warning was clear: change your ways or I will forsake you and your temple.

What is remarkable about this passage - and others like it in Isaiah 1 and Zechariah 7 - is how God details what true repentance looks like. It wasn't enough for Israel to just say sorry and offer another sacrifice. Jeremiah says that the proof of a repentant heart is love and care for the poor.

In other words, for Israel to truly amend their ways they needed to do justice for "the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow."

This is a truly amazing reality! God was so committed to protecting yātôm that he was willing to forsake his own temple if Israel was unwilling to start loving and caring for the poor. God was unwilling to dwell with his people if they continued to oppress and take advantage of the marginalized. And what would be the evidence that Israel had truly repented and changed their ways? The sign of true repentance would be doing justice for yātôm. This is our fifth and final theme: Doing justice for yātôm is a marker of true repentance from sin. [See Is. 1:17; Jer 7:5-7; 22:3; Zech 7:10]

What are the implications from this doctrine of true repentance?

1. First, true repentance is a whole-life action that leads to whole-life change. Biblical repentance is not only saying "I am sorry," it is also saying "I will change." The Christian who claims they have been forgiven by God must in turn forgive other people (Lk 6:37; Eph 5:1). The Christian who claims they have been adopted by God, must in turn care for the orphan (Jas 1:27). This is the very nature of salvation! The grace of God has appeared to all who are saved, teaching them to live a life of godliness, imitating the work of Christ (Titus 2:11-13).

2. The second life-shaping implication of true repentance is that we are all invited to repent and begin to defend and care for the poor. In some way, all of us have fallen short of God's command to love the poor. And instead of trying to justify ourselves before God with a list of what we have done, Jeremiah invites us to repent of what we have left undone. Repentance is the first step in living a life of justice and righteousness before God. God's mercies are new every morning and he is quick to forgive and empower all who come humbly before him to repent of sin and ask for help. It is the Father's joy to teach his children how to love and care for the poor, especially yātôm.

Pray

Father, I repent of the many ways that I have justified myself and fought for my will to be done. I want to be more like you and I want your will to be done. Your will cares about all of us. You wish for all to experience your love. Show me how to love justice and defend the needy. Give me eyes that are full of mercy, and a softened heart that leads my entire body into action. By the blood of your Son Jesus, Amen.

Reflect

Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal areas where your heart has become hardened. Then, ask God where He might be wanting to do a new thing in those hardened spaces.

Parting words for the journey ahead

We've come to the end of our study and discovered additional puzzle pieces that have given us a fuller understanding of God's heart for vulnerable children, communicated throughout the Scriptures. These five key themes and their implications not only paint a beautiful picture of God's heart for yātôm, but also better equip us to love and serve children and youth in foster care.

As you reflect on each theme, consider continuing your study by digging deeper into the highlighted passages. We have separated them by the different types of books that make up The Bible. These serve as additional puzzle pieces offered to us by God throughout history, all to better understand His heart.

Theme #1 **Because God is the one who brings judgment on those who oppress yātôm, my anger towards and lament of oppression are justified and I am free to love knowing that vengeance belongs to the Lord.**

Books of the Law:
- Exodus 22:14-23
- Deuteronomy 27:19

Prophets:
- Isaiah 10:1-3
- Jeremiah 5:28-29
- Jeremiah 22:1-5
- Zechariah 7:4-14
- Malachi 3:1-5

Theme #2 **Because God will bring blessing on those who protect and care for yātôm, I am invited to enjoy the deep, soul-satisfying joy of being with God in the work he is doing, getting a front-row seat to God's redemptive work in the lives of the fatherless.**

Books of the Law:
- Deuteronomy 14:28-29
- Deuteronomy 26:12-15

Theme #3 **Because God himself provides for and defends yātôm, I am free to love and serve children and youth in foster care. My confidence does not lie in my own ability to save and to heal; it lies with the Great Physician, the ultimate Father to the fatherless and Defender of the vulnerable.**

Books of the Law:
- Deuteronomy 10:17-18

Wisdom Books:
- Psalm 10:14
- Psalm 68:4-6
- Psalm 146:9

Gospels:
- Matthew 5:16

Followers of The Way:
- 1 Corinthians 3:7

Theme #4 **Because I myself was once spiritually vulnerable and in need of rescue, I have great empathy for children and youth in foster care and I am safeguarded against thinking I am the savior and main character of the foster care story.**

Books of the Law:
- Deuteronomy 16:12
- Deuteronomy 24:17-22

Gospels:
- Matthew 6:14
- Luke 10:37
- John 15:5

Followers of The Way:
- Ephesians 5:1-2

Theme #5 **Because God is gracious and his mercies are new every morning, even when I fail to love, serve and protect yātôm, God offers me unlimited second chances through the gift of true repentance.**

Prophets:
- Isaiah 1:16-20

Gospels:
- Luke 6:37

Followers of The Way:
- Titus 2:11-14
- James 1:27

Pray

Father, I repent of the many ways that I have justified myself and fought for my will to be done. I want to be more like you and I want your will to be done. Your will cares about all of us. You wish for all to experience your love. Show me how to love justice and defend the needy. Give me eyes that are full of mercy and a softened heart that leads my entire body into action. By the blood of your son Jesus, Amen.

Reflect

Sometimes the will of God feels like a mystery. What has become more clear to me about the will of God through this study?