

11A

RELIGION

Take
time to
studySunday
School Lesson

Devotional reading: Ezekiel 3:16-21
Lesson scripture: Ezekiel 2:1-3:21

Very often, denial is the first response to unwelcome news: "No! That can't be true!" But denial may stand in the way of what needs to be done.

This was illustrated in our lesson last week. Jeremiah told his people they would be captives in Babylon if they did not change their ways. If they had accepted the truth and changed their ways, they could have remained in Jerusalem. But they chose to deny the truth, and so they became captives.

Review the three phases of Judah's disaster as they are described in the Introduction to last week's lesson. That lesson fell in the second phase, and so does this one. King Jehoiachin and ten thousand citizens of Judah were captives in Babylon already; other thousands still lived in Judah. Jeremiah was one of those. Last week, we read of his controversy with the false prophet Hananiah.

Ezekiel was one of the captives who had been taken along with the ten thousand. He gave God's message to the other exiles in Babylon. Last week's lesson was dated in the fourth year of king Zedekiah (Jeremiah 28:1). This week's lesson is dated nearly a year later. By then, the captives had been in Babylon nearly five years (Ezekiel 1:1-3).

From the opening verses of Ezekiel, we learn that he was nearly thirty years old when the Lord called him to be a prophet. With other captives he was settled "by the river of Chebar" (Ezekiel 1:1). It is thought that this was actually one of the large irrigation canals in the land of Babylon. The captives may have worked in grain fields, vineyards, and date orchards similar to those in Judah; but the flat plain of Babylon was certainly different from the hills of home. See how their grief was expressed in Psalm 137:1-6.

God gave specific instructions to Adam and Eve: "Leave that fruit alone. It will harm you." To the people of Israel He gave more extensive instructions in the Law, and added the inspired teaching of prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel. To people of later ages, including us, He gave Jesus and the apostles. The way of life has never been hidden from human sight. Why do so many people choose to die?

God helps us not only by His Word; He helps us also by His presence. Jesus is there when we meet together in His name (Matthew 18:20). When one of us knows a Christian friend with is him, he is not alone. The Holy Spirit is with him (1 Corinthians 6:19). And God is one: the Father and the Son also abide with us when we love them and obey them. Jesus said, "If a man love me, he will keep my words; and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him" (John 14:23). If we love Jesus, we will obey Him. Then both He and His Father will live with us. So we are never alone, and we do not make decisions for ourselves alone. Planning calls for consultation. As I think of what I would like to do today, I ask, "Will Jesus and His Father go along with that?" If they will not, neither will I.

Islam, faith strong for local brothers

Local members of Nation of Islam speak on religion and life

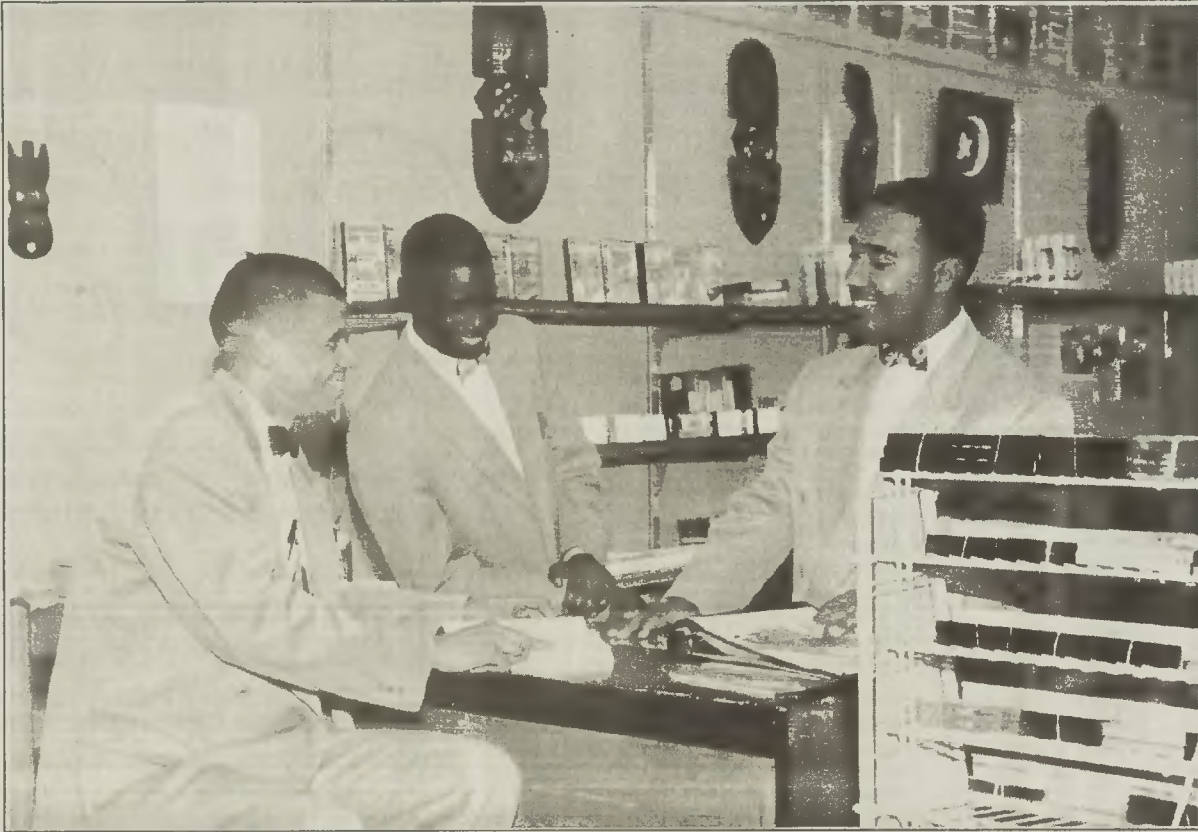


PHOTO: SUE ANN JOHNSON

Members of the Nation of Islam gather at The Respect for Life Bookstore to discuss the Qu'ran. From left, Minister Robert Muhammad, Brother Marcus, and Brother James X.

By Jeri Young
THE CHARLOTTE POST

Brother James X sits among the quiet chaos of The Respect For Life Bookstore off Beatties Ford Road.

"As salaam alaikum, my sister," he says to a young woman who comes in to check a purchase on hold. "Peace be unto you."

The thoughtful, well-spoken 24-year-old is one the hundreds of thousands of young black men nationwide who have joined the often controversial Nation of Islam, the faith brought to prominence by fiery human rights leader Malcolm X and currently led by Minister Louis Farrakhan.

James admits that he "liked women" and occasionally did drugs before joining the Nation of Islam.

Newspaper headlines blast the faith for its often stringent politics, but members tell a different story of a faith where the past is simply that.

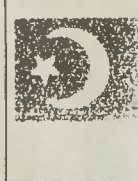
"I think what made me join Islam is when I first came and heard Minister Robert (Muhammad) teach," he said. "I had been going to church for years and years and years, but nothing ever made me feel that what I was doing was wrong. I could see morally that I should not steal or fornicate, but it was nothing that when I went home and laid down, that ate me up. However, when I came into the knowledge of Islam - it would - just the thought of wrong-would just tear me up."

James said it was the example that the other brothers set that made the decision for him. "Here is a man who looks like me and talks like me that is doing correctness," he said. "All I can tell you is that it changed me. It put something inside me that made me want to change."

James began purchasing tapes by Nation of Islam ministers almost two years ago. The tapes and his own discontent led him to the mosque on Tuckaseegee Road. He will never forget his first visit.

"I had listened to Brother Khalid Muhammad on rap tapes. I was actually going to the store getting tapes before I came to the mosque. I had almost drawn all the knowledge I could on my own," he said with a laugh. "I said 'Let me go see what is going on.'"

What was going on, he said, was a church where he was greeted as an equal.



"It was like I had a feeling that his is where I am supposed to be when I went in there," he said. "I wasn't dressed or anything, I had on jeans and everything. I went to the door and it was like (being a brother), the whole time I just felt at ease."

"I knew there had to be something here," he said. "It made me want to strive to be correct."

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"Who brought me to the Nation of Islam was no person but Allah..."

It is hard to believe that the eloquent Brother Marcus, a four-month member of the Nation, is only 22. As he sells The Final Call newspaper on the corner of Beatties Ford Road and LaSalle Street, he thanks buyers and murmurs "I love you."

He mulls every answer carefully.

"Today is my birthday," he said quietly. "I am 22."

Like James, Marcus admits to being a "ladies man."

All of that changed after he found Islam.

"I called on my God," he said. "I was at a low time of faith in my life. I didn't know who my God was."

Marcus found himself at a Washington, D.C., library searching for more than eight hours through books on religion. He found no answers to the emptiness he felt.

"At the end, when I walked out I found nothing that interested me," he said. "I actually looked up into the sky. I knew that God was going to give me an answer."

A voice came told him to go back into the library where he wandered around the stacks. He came across "The Message to the Blackman in America," written by Nation of Islam founder Elijah Muhammad. As he began to read, he realized that he needed to know more about the faith.

"I began to read the book," he said. "I wrote down the

prayers and I started saying them. I said as soon as I get back to Charlotte, I am going to the Mosque."

Like James, he came to the his first service casually. He remembers wearing jeans and a t-shirt, but still he was comfortable.

"I can say that it was my personal experiences, the things I read about and saw that made me want to change," he said. "Just going out on the street corners and seeing what conditions my people are in made me want to change. I was searching for the truth. I wanted to know who my God was."

Filling a void

For both James and Marcus, the Nation of Islam provides not only a spiritual base, but a much-needed family. While both have good relationships with their biological families, they admit that the bond between brothers is special. Neither had strong father figures and both feel that within the brotherhood of the Nation, they have found not only peace but family.

"I have seen black men," James said. "But I never had one in my house so I could see how it was supposed to be. The ones I did see I had already been like them. That wasn't correct."

"I had been in my church for years," he added. "When me and my friends sat down to talk even in church there was

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Church
opts to
fight
violence
head on

By Hattie Bernstein and
Dianel Rietman
THE TELEGRAPH OF NASHUA

NASHUA, N.H. - In the family, most religions teach, anger is human but violence is not.

Despite these teachings, some religious leaders say, domestic violence is a serious problem that requires attention, intervention, education and support.

It's everywhere, the leaders agree. Even in congregations or parishes where little is reported. Even among peers.

Still, the role the faith community plays in addressing this issue is not always clear.

"I would say probably many congregations, parishes, don't do what people think they should. They don't want to acknowledge a problem, or are perpetrators or victims themselves and find it embarrassing," says the Rev. Robert E. Morgan of Milford United Methodist Church.

At the Milford church, domestic violence will be the topic of an observance in January during Domestic Violence Weekend, which includes a Saturday evening program and a Sunday church service.

"The church should be aware of everything that affects the human condition, not just spiritual (issues)," says Morgan.

Nationally, October is Domestic Violence Month: a time to focus on a problem some experts say is an epidemic.

Locally, some religious leaders say they are planning special sermons or programs to acknowledge the observance. Others say they were not aware of the observance but routinely address social issues affecting their members.

Violence in the family - whether man against woman, woman against man, adult against child - affects every community, church leaders say. Likewise, violence among same sex couples, while not as readily addressed in the mainstream churches, can plague communities.

"The church provides a safe space to come to," says the Rev. Fran Peel of the Nashua Presbyterian Church. "It points to the hope we all have."

Peel says the church's teachings provide a format for both victim and perpetrator to get help and to heal wounds. But the church also offers practical assistance: connection to resources in the community at large, including shelters, support groups, and marital and personal counseling.

Peel says she has counseled victims and helped them find shelter. She also advises engaged couples on conflict resolution.

"In this small church, I am seeing it," she says. "It's an epidemic at this point."

Says Dale Ohmart, pastor of Londonderry Christian Church: "Domestic violence is one of those underground issues that makes assessing so difficult."

Ohmart says he addresses the issue as a sidebar to his talks on creating a healthy marriage and family. He says he is also prepared to counsel and assist victims.

EYE ON GOSPEL

Back in the mix: Beau Williams gets back in the thick of the gospel recording scene with the Oct. 11 release of "They Need To Know," which marks his recording debut under the INSYNC Christian Music Company banner.

The Salem, Ore.-based label was launched in 1995 by Monty Jackson and Jim Huddart. Jackson recorded two albums as a member of the Jackson Family (no kin to the famed Jacksons) on Command Records in the late '80s. Co-owner Jim Huddart is a Christian entrepreneur and church official who put his business expertise to use with the label. Together - one white and the other, black - they hope to cross racial barriers bond together the body of Christ with music designed to minister to the heart.

Also shipping to retail from INSYNC was gospel jazz guitarist Tim Bowman's "Love, Joy, Peace." Both artists were showcased during the August meeting of the Gospel Music Workshop of



Adams

America. Williams was the label's first signee.

"They Need To Know" is his first album in two years. However, regular exposure on the Trinity Broadcast Network has helped him to maintain a high profile.

"We began marketing in September and there's quite a buzz," notes independent marketing and promotion specialist Barry Martin, who was retained to work the project. "With this album - which is more contemporary - we're trying to broaden his reach, so we've shipped product to adult contemporary, inspirational and gospel radio formats in an effort to reach the total marketplace and thus for the response has been very good."

For now, the label - which hopes to sign somewhere around eight acts by the end of next year - seems to be right on track. In August, they signed Grammy-award winning vocalist Daniel Winans. A project is due out in February.

Briefly: Congratulations to Tribute recording artist Yolanda Adams on her recent engagement...r&b crooner Brian McKnight is set to produce two tracks from the forthcoming sophomore album from Benson recording artist Gary Oliver.

Finally, Rev. Clay Evans' AARC Mass Choir is slated to record a much anticipated follow up project to their highly successful "I've Got A Testimony" next month at Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church in Chicago (where Evans is pastor).