



the **GOSPEL**PROJECT.

# FROM CAPTIVITY TO RESTORATION

ADULTS / DAILY DISCIPLESHIP GUIDE / WINTER 2022-23 / VOL. 6



# GOD'S WORD TO YOU

## HOPE IN THE MIDST OF DARKNESS

God's plan to redeem humanity centered on Him forming a people through whom He would bring blessing to the world (Genesis 12:1-3). It would be through this people—the descendants of Abraham—that One would come to crush the head of the serpent (Genesis 3:15) and put an end to sin and death. Not only would God's blessing come through the Israelites, it would be extended to them. God had promised to care for His people, to protect them, and to be their God and their Father.

But one of the ways good fathers bless is by disciplining their wayward, disobedient children. Just as God had promised to take care of Israel many times, he had also warned them of the consequences of their disobedience. But they failed to listen. Time and time again, they played the harlot with pagan gods, wanting the faithful blessings of the one true God without being faithful to Him.

God's response is found in the prophets and can be summarized by one word: Repent. God called on His people to turn from their wicked ways and turn back to Him. If they did, He would receive them back, but if they did not, He would bring destruction upon them—not punitive destruction but restorative destruction. His discipline is always corrective.

And still, the people would not listen; they would not repent. So judgment came. First, it came in the form of the Assyrian army, which conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel and hauled off its people into captivity. But even witnessing this did not draw the rest of God's people to repentance. And so, judgment came again, this time through the Babylonian army, which destroyed the Southern Kingdom of Judah, including Jerusalem, and exiled its people.

These were dark days for God's people. They were prisoners in foreign lands, their land was occupied by a pagan people, and the temple lay in ruins. The blessings of God seemed more distant than ever. Impossible even. But even if it was difficult for the people to see, God was drawing His master plan together—the promised Seed, the Deliverer, was closer than ever. In a blistering cadence of activity to close out the Old Testament, God restored His people to the land and the temple and city of Jerusalem were rebuilt, but then God went silent. For four hundred years, the people looked, listened, and waited—the stage was set for Jesus to come and crush the serpent's head.

# CONTENTS



All Ages Study Plan .....	6
How to Use the Daily Discipleship Guide .....	8
7 Arrows of Bible Reading .....	10

SUGGESTED FOR  
THE WEEK OF

## UNIT 16: THE LORD KEEPS HIS EYE ON THOSE WHO FEAR HIM

Introduction .....	12
Dec. 4 Session 1 <b>God's Promise to His People</b> (Jeremiah 29–30) .....	16
Dec. 11 Session 2 <b>God's Reward for the Faithful</b> (Daniel 1) .....	24
Dec. 18 Session 3 <b>God's Judgment of the Prideful</b> (Daniel 5) .....	32
Dec. 25 Session 4 <b>God's Presence in All Places</b> (Doctrine: God Is Omnipresent) .	40

## UNIT 17: TAKE REFUGE IN THE LORD

Introduction .....	48
Jan. 1 Session 1 <b>A People Returned</b> (Ezra 1–2) .....	52
Jan. 8 Session 2 <b>A People Cleansed</b> (Zechariah 13–14) .....	60
Jan. 15 Session 3 <b>A Temple Restored</b> (Ezra 2–6) .....	68
Jan. 22 Session 4 <b>A Promise Inherited</b> (Doctrine: God Is Truthful) .....	76

## UNIT 18: FOR LOOK, THE DAY IS COMING

Introduction .....	84
Jan. 29 Session 1 <b>A Rescuing Queen</b> (Esther) .....	88
Feb. 5 Session 2 <b>An Interceding Cupbearer</b> (Nehemiah 1–7) .....	96
Feb. 12 Session 3 <b>A Proclaiming Priest</b> (Ezra 7–10; Nehemiah 8) .....	104
Feb. 19 Session 4 <b>A Confessing Community</b> (Nehemiah 9–10) .....	112
Feb. 26 Session 5 <b>A Burdened People</b> (Doctrine: Guilt and Shame) .....	120

Food for the Soul .....	128
References .....	130

# THE EDITOR

I've never run a marathon, but I've heard that there is a point in the middle somewhere when runners often hit a wall, metaphorically, and the next few miles become a slog. At this point, will power must help the person continue to put one exhausted leg in front of the other.

This point in our journey through the storyline of the Bible, nearing the end of the Old Testament, might feel like a slog to some. We've witnessed creation, the fall, promises, and fulfillments, the exodus, the wilderness, and the conquest of the promised land. The period of the judges is fascinating and so too can be that of the kings, though with lots of repetition of leaders "doing evil in the sight of the Lord." Then comes the exile, like a seventy-year time out for the Israelites and the reader.

But don't allow your anticipation for this period of the storyline to wane because the territory may be unfamiliar and even depressing. The historical stories covered in this volume are true tales of our God's sovereign faithfulness in places familiar and places far, and we surely need them. We all have wrestled with the feeling that we don't belong here, as if we were in some sort of "exile." For believers, we do make our homes here on earth, with family and friends and church. But in another sense, this is not our home, as we are heading on our journey home to be with Jesus, our Lord, forever. In the struggles, hardships, temptations, and consequences of our sin now, we need the encouragement drawn from these passages to remind us that God is in control of all things, continues to be with us, and longs to be in relationship with each one of His image-bearers. Let's continue to learn from Scripture, letting the Holy Spirit give us a second wind so we can finish the race well.

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## The Gospel Project®

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**We believe** that the Bible has God for its author; salvation for its end; and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter and that all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. To review Lifeway's doctrinal guideline, please visit [www.lifeway.com/doctrinalguideline](http://www.lifeway.com/doctrinalguideline).

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# ALL AGES STUDY PLAN

## **VOL 1: From Creation to Chaos**

(Genesis) Fall 2021

**Unit 1:** The Heavens Declare the Glory of God (Gen. 1–2; Pss. 8; 96)

**Unit 2:** Let Us Make a Name for Ourselves (Gen. 3–11)

**Unit 3:** I Will Make Your Name Great (Gen. 11–50)

## **VOL 2: From Captivity to the Wilderness**

(Exodus–Deuteronomy) Winter 2021–22

**Unit 4:** Out of Egypt I Called My Son (Ex. 1–15)

**Unit 5:** To Dwell in the House of the Lord (Ex. 16–40; Lev.)

**Unit 6:** Be Holy, Because I Am Holy (Num. 13–14; 20–21)

## **VOL 3: From Conquest to a Kingdom**

(Joshua–1 Samuel) Spring 2022

**Unit 7:** Lord, Teach Me Your Statutes (Josh. 1; 3–4)

**Unit 8:** Fear the Lord and Worship Him (Josh. 2; 6–11; 23–24)

**Unit 9:** There Is No Fear of God Before Their Eyes (Judg.; Ruth; 1 Sam. 1–6)

## **VOL 4: From Unity to Division**

(1 Samuel–1 Kings) Summer 2022

**Unit 10:** Because of Your Hardened Heart (1 Sam. 8–15)

**Unit 11:** Create a Clean Heart for Me (1 Sam. 16–17; 2 Sam. 6–7; 11–12)

**Unit 12:** If You Walk Before Me with a Heart of Integrity (1 Kings 1–12)

## **VOL 5: From Rebellion to Exile**

(1 Kings–The Prophets) Fall 2022

**Unit 13:** Your Passions Wage War Within You (1 Kings 12–18; 2 Kings 1–5; Isa. 44)

**Unit 14:** Seek the Lord, All You Humble of the Earth (2 Chron. 24; Isa. 22; 25; 30; Zeph.)

**Unit 15:** He Has Made Every Nationality (Jonah; Nah.; 2 Chron. 36)

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## **VOL 6: From Captivity to Restoration**

(The Prophets, Ezra–Esther) Winter 2022–23

**Unit 16:** The Lord Keeps His Eye on Those Who Fear Him (Jer. 29–30; Dan.)

**Unit 17:** Take Refuge in the Lord (Ezra 1–6; Zech. 13–14)

**Unit 18:** For Look, the Day Is Coming (Esth.; Neh.; Mal.)

## **VOL 7: From Heaven to Earth**

(The Gospels) Spring 2023

**Unit 19:** Here Is the Lamb of God  
(John 1–2; Luke 2; Mark 1; Matt. 4)

**Unit 20:** God’s Love Was Revealed  
Among Us in This Way (John 3–4)

**Unit 21:** Without Faith It Is Impossible  
to Please God (Luke 4–5)

## **VOL 8: From Wonder to Rejection**

(The Gospels) Summer 2023

**Unit 22:** The Works That I Do in My  
Father’s Name Testify About Me  
(Mark 4; 8; Luke 5; Matt. 9; John 10)

**Unit 23:** The Kingdom of God Is in Your  
Midst (Matt. 5–7; 13; 24; Luke 15; 17)

**Unit 24:** God’s Glory in the Face of Jesus  
Christ (Luke 13; John 11)

## **VOL 9: From Death to Resurrection**

(The Gospels) Fall 2023

**Unit 25:** Jerusalem, Jerusalem,  
Who Kills the Prophets  
(Matt. 21–25; Mark 1; John 6; 14)

**Unit 26:** The Hour Has Come  
(John 12; Matt. 26)

**Unit 27:** The King of the Jews  
(Luke 22–23; Matt. 27–28)

## **VOL 10: From Many People to One People**

(The Gospels, Acts) Winter 2023-24

**Unit 28:** I Am with You Always  
(Luke 24; John 20–21; Matt. 28)

**Unit 29:** You Will Be My Witnesses  
(Acts 1–2)

**Unit 30:** Every Day the Lord Added to  
Their Number (Acts 2–5)

## **VOL 11: From One Nation to All Nations**

(Acts and Epistles) Spring 2024

**Unit 31:** Every Knee Will Bow  
(Acts 5–8; Phil. 2)

**Unit 32:** The Power and the Wisdom  
of God (Acts 9–12; 1 Cor. 1; 12)

**Unit 33:** A Prisoner of Christ Jesus  
(Acts 9; 13–14; Philem.)

## **VOL 12: From This World to the World to Come**

(Acts, Epistles, Revelation) Summer 2024

**Unit 34:** Ambassadors for Christ  
(Acts 15–19; 2 Cor. 5; Eph. 4)

**Unit 35:** That I May Gain Christ  
(Acts 20–28; Phil. 3)

**Unit 36:** A New Heaven and a New Earth  
(Rev. 4–5; 19–22)

# HOW TO USE THE DAILY DISCIPLESHIP GUIDE

*Central to your personal and group experience with The Gospel Project for Adults is the Daily Discipleship Guide. Here's how to make the most of your time with it:*

## BEGIN WITH PERSONAL TIME IN THE WORD

We recommend beginning your week with the daily devotions. These devotions lay a foundation for what will be explored and discussed in your group time as you build healthy rhythms of personal discipleship.



### DAY 1

#### READ:

Jeremiah 29:1-7

#### FOCAL PASSAGE:

Jeremiah 29:4-7

#### NOTES

#### VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"Punishment can never happen to a child of God in the judicial sense; he can never be brought before God as his Judge, as charged with guilt, because that guilt was long ago transferred to the shoulders of Christ, and the punishment was exacted at the hands of his surety. But yet... while he shall never be arraigned before God's bar as a criminal, and punished for his guilt, yet he now stands in a new relationship—that of a child to his parent; and as a son he may be chastised on account of sin. Folly is bound up in the heart of all God's children, and the rod of the Father must bring that folly out of them."

—Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892)

The word "discipline" typically has a negative connotation with people. We often don't see the benefit of discipline in our lives. We especially have a hard time understanding spiritual discipline, or discipline from God. The purpose of discipline in general—and from God specifically—is not for our harm at all. It is actually for our good. God disciplines His people when they turn away from Him in order to get them to turn back.

The book of Jeremiah speaks to a time when God had sent His people into exile because they rebelled against Him. Though God wanted them to enjoy the blessing of the land that He had given them, He punished them because their habitual idolatry stopped them from living in the land the way they were made to live in the land. So God removed them from the land in order to get them turned back toward Him. But God's desire was not to decimate His people; His desire was for them to thrive and grow.

In the midst of God's discipline, we often miss the good things that God is doing in us through His divine parental care. We find ourselves forgetting His goodness and believing the lie that He has completely abandoned us. We cry out to God to remove His discipline, not understanding that His discipline is meant to grow us. God is a good Father, and He wants us to enjoy Him more than the things that He provides. When we see His discipline in light of His goodness, we are freed to thrive even when we're facing hardships brought on by our disobedience.

**What can you do to help you see the goodness of God in the midst of discipline?**





## STUDY THE BIBLE WITH YOUR BIBLE

Reading and studying the Bible is absolutely life-changing, and we believe the best way to study the Bible is to use the Bible you own. Whether you read from the CSB, ESV, NIV, KJV, or many other translations, the Daily Discipleship Guide helps you engage with the session not only with our book but your Book.



## GET BACK TO BASICS

As you read and study, we recommend using the tool found in your Daily Discipleship Guide called the “7 Arrows of Bible Reading.” The 7 Arrows guide both novice and experienced students of the Word through the basic mechanics of Bible study by asking a few key questions of any passage (see pages 10-11 for more information).

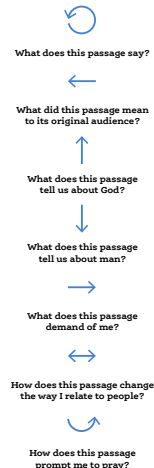
### 7 ARROWS OF BIBLE READING

by Matt Rogers

There is often a vast disconnect between the awareness of the need for disciple-making and practical tools that actually aid in this work. Three factors are essential: Scripture, relationships, and time. Discipleship happens when the life-changing truth of Scripture is infused into genuine relationships over an extended period of time.

Our desire was to create a simple, reproducible strategy that would facilitate this process. This led us to develop a simple strategy for small clusters (2-3 people) to meet together regularly and talk about the Scriptures and apply them to their lives.

The seven arrows of Bible reading were an attempt at developing a tool for proper hermeneutics to power these relationships. We did not want our people to simply talk about the Bible. We wanted them to understand the Bible and know how to apply it to their lives. Each cluster would read a predetermined passage of Scripture and discuss it using these seven arrows.



10

## DISCUSS AND APPLY IN COMMUNITY

Each session concludes with a two-page discussion guide. This guide includes the key points of the session along with interactive questions and activities designed to address the needs of a variety of learning styles. Mark up the discussion guide, make notes, fill in the blanks, do the activities, write out questions and thoughts—make it yours!



# 7 ARROWS OF BIBLE READING

by Matt Rogers

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**What does this passage say?**



**What did this passage mean to its original audience?**



**What does this passage tell us about God?**



**What does this passage tell us about man?**



**What does this passage demand of me?**



**How does this passage change the way I relate to people?**



**How does this passage prompt me to pray?**

**ARROW 1:** The goal was for the clusters to start by summarizing the main point of the passage as succinctly as possible, ideally in one sentence.

**ARROW 2:** Next, the clusters sought to discern authorial intent for the passage by asking what it meant to its original audience. Since a text of Scripture can never mean what it never meant, it is necessary to begin by discerning what the text meant. Often this may require the clusters to consult other study tools or cross-reference other biblical texts to arrive at the meaning of the text.

**ARROW 3:** Thirdly, we asked what the text tells us about the nature and character of God and specifically His work through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

**ARROW 4:** Fourthly, the text was analyzed to see what it tells us about humanity. Bryan Chappell refers to this as the “fallen condition focus” of the text. What does the text reveal about sin and humankind’s need for the gospel?

**ARROW 5:** Then we moved the clusters to application. Since we had rooted the clusters in the meaning of the text, they were now positioned to rightly apply it’s meaning to their lives.

**ARROW 6:** From there we wanted our clusters to apply the Scripture to their relationships with others. Ideally, they would discuss how the text shaped both how they related to other believers and how they lived on mission in the world.

**ARROW 7:** Finally, the clusters rooted their prayers in the Scriptures. Hopefully, the previous six arrows kindled the flames of passionate prayer in the lives of the clusters—both for their own sanctification and for their mission to the lost.

With this model, we touched on three important areas for discipleship:

**Scripture**—Disciple-making was rooted in a rightful understanding of Scripture and not in simply doing life together, unpacking another sermon, or dependance on classroom instruction.

**Simplicity**—Disciple-making was simple enough for everyone to get involved. All believers could take these principles, a Bible, and a relationship with a young Christian and get to work.

**Stickiness**—Disciple-making through understanding and applying Scripture was etched in the minds of our young church. They could use these same arrows not only to guide their cluster discussions but also their personal Bible study, small group leadership, and comprehension of sermons.

These arrows have proven to be a unique tool in our disciple-making toolbox that the Lord is using to call and build faithful and fruitful followers of Jesus.

Matt Rogers is the teaching pastor at The Church at Cherrydale in Greenville, South Carolina. His church developed the Seven Arrows tool to help people read and understand Scripture within their small groups. The concept has gone on to form the basis of a 52-week devotional for teens from Lifeway Students, the Seven Arrows Bible from B&H, and is now featured in The Gospel Project for Adults and Students.

## UNIT 16

+

**THE LORD**

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**KEEPS HIS EYE**

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**ON THOSE**

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**WHO FEAR HIM**

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# “Without Fail I Will Save You”

by Andrea Burke

When my brother was little, my parents brought him along with my other siblings to the county fair that set up shop right in the center of a neighboring town. The quintessential fair rides seemed to appear overnight, as well as the crowds of popcorn eaters, face painters, and farm hands. As my family’s story goes, on a busy Fourth of July summer night, my brother was standing at my father’s side holding his hand in one moment, and then the next, he was gone. In a crowd of strangers, my 4-year-old brother simply slipped out of his grip and disappeared.

My father is a relatively quiet man, a man of peace and not eager to start a fight—that is, until he’s unable to find his son. My father’s normally kind and jovial voice, at that moment, turned into a full yell. He pushed through the crowd, elbowing those who were in his way, shouting my brother’s name. He made as much of a scene as he could. For hours, he searched. As my mother waited in the car with a newborn baby and my sister, my father wouldn’t rest until he was

with his son again. My father searched and searched and eventually found him under the watchful eye of the county fair security guard, to whom my brother was still weaving his story of how his father was actually the one who was lost.

## GOD’S FAITHFULNESS IN EXILE

In the world we live in, it can be tempting to think that God has lost us, that we are, in fact, forgotten in some dusty fairground and God has gone home to watch television. We wonder if He still cares about our plight. Living as exiles in a world that hates all that God has commanded, we know what it feels like to be a displaced people. In Jeremiah, we see God explicitly reminding His people that He was with them to save them. God is never shadowing us like a voyeur to our pain. He is with us. He is not twiddling His thumbs while we feel swallowed in a world that is foreign to us. He is active, watching, and present. Always. Throughout the exile of Israel and Judah, God never forgot what belonged to Him.

Not His gold, His silver, or His children. This is a God who will do whatever it takes to get to His children, including sending His Son to come and die and claim us as His own.

The hard part for us is when we start to think our home is in a random security tent on the fairgrounds and not in our father's safekeeping. Does He remember us? Does He see when we dishonor Him? Does He see when we strive to obey even in His seeming absence? Are we left here without a plan, healing, or any hope for restoration?

These are questions God anticipated His children would ask. As a good father, He knew that we would run away, get lost in a crowd of strangers, and end up telling a story of how God must be lost. He knew how our hearts weave stories that simply aren't real, and so, He tells us over and over again the same truths: He sees us. He knows us. We are not lost to Him. And most certainly, He does have a plan to come and restore us back to Him.

In Jeremiah, we see God's plan to pursue His children. He saw every single one in exile and was keenly attuned to their pain,

We are not lost  
to Him. And most  
certainly, He does  
have a plan to come  
and restore us  
back to Him.

their prayers, their obedience, and their disobedience. His discipline was swift and His mercy was their redemption. Those who were exiled were always His, even if they felt like they had slipped out of His grip. He told them through Jeremiah that they would again be His people and He would be their God.

### **GOD'S FAITHFULNESS IN THE WAITING**

In Daniel, we get to see an up-close story of how this plays out. God not only remembers His people but is with them in their need. So when their faithfulness to God's Word and commands is tested, they can stand firm.

God is never shadowing us like a voyeur  
to our pain. He is with us. He is active,  
watching, and present. Always.

# God sees us, watches us, and keeps His steady, unblinking, never-sleeping eye on us at all times.

Daniel lived as a faithful exile in a city that wanted to profane all things the Lord called holy. But Daniel knew God would bring justice for His people, so he lived a faithful life waiting for God's redemption—part of a plan that was already in the works since the dawn of creation. While God's people waited in exile, God was weaving together the plan that would ultimately result in the cries of a virgin-born baby in a stranger's barn. God had not lost His people; He had been near the entire time.

## **GOD IS NOT LOST**

I sometimes wonder what my brother thought as a small, helpless boy in the confusion. As an adult, I know there are times in life when the suffering feels too great, there seems to be no rescue plan, and God feels distant and silent. Yet God is not an earthly father pushing through thousands of people trying to find us. He is not looking for a security guard to keep us safe while He wanders away. He's not banging on the window of strangers' cars, wondering if we're still in safekeeping. God sees us, watches us, and keeps His steady, unblinking, never-sleeping eye on us at all times.

Jesus tells us in John 10:28-29 that we are safe in His keeping and that nothing can snatch us out of the Father's hand. In the Old Testament, we see men and women trusting in God's faithfulness even in seasons and years of exile and suffering. We see them hold fast to what is true, anchoring their hope in a God who sees them and hasn't forgotten them. All the more, we who now have the mystery of Christ revealed to us can follow in their example. No matter what we face, God's hand holds us. Even when we're like my brother, trying to convince people that our father is lost, the truth is that we are never lost to Him. He is on the move, watching, saving, and running to those who are His.



# GOD'S PROMISE TO HIS PEOPLE

**+** **SESSION IN A SENTENCE:**

A day will come when God will bring ultimate freedom, healing, and restoration to His people.

**+** **BACKGROUND PASSAGE:**

Jeremiah 29–30

**+** **SETTING:**

The history of Israel, in both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, contains many ups and downs. God would do wonders in the sight of His people. They would love God and worship Him. But soon they would forget. God sent godly leaders, judges, kings, and prophets to woo them back. But as the people continue to stray from Him, God eventually allowed their enemies to take His people into exile and captivity because He is a holy and just God. But in His love and faithfulness, He continued to speak through prophets, like Jeremiah, to encourage His people because He was still with them and freedom was coming.



# DAY 1

## READ:

**Jeremiah 29:1-7**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Jeremiah 29:4-7**

## NOTES

## VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

“Punishment can never happen to a child of God in the judicial sense, he can never be brought before God as his Judge, as charged with guilt, because that guilt was long ago transferred to the shoulders of Christ, and the punishment was exacted at the hands of his surety. But yet . . . while he shall never be arraigned before God’s bar as a criminal, and punished for his guilt, yet he now stands in a new relationship—that of a child to his parent: and as a son he may be chastised on account of sin. Folly is bound up in the heart of all God’s children, and the rod of the Father must bring that folly out of them.”<sup>1</sup>

—Charles Spurgeon  
(1834-1892)

The word “discipline” typically has a negative connotation with people. We often don’t see the benefit of discipline in our lives. We especially have a hard time understanding spiritual discipline, or discipline from God. The purpose of discipline in general—and from God specifically—is not for our harm at all. It is actually for our good. God disciplines His people when they turn away from Him in order to get them to turn back.

The book of Jeremiah speaks to a time when God had sent His people into exile because they rebelled against Him. Though God wanted them to enjoy the blessing of the land that He had given them, He punished them because their habitual idolatry stopped them from living in the land the way they were made to live in the land. So God removed them from the land in order to get them turned back toward Him. But God’s desire was not to decimate His people; His desire was for them to thrive and grow.

In the midst of God’s discipline, we often miss the good things that God is doing in us through His divine parental care. We find ourselves forgetting His goodness and believing the lie that He has completely abandoned us. We cry out to God to remove His discipline, not understanding that His discipline is meant to grow us. God is a good Father, and He wants us to enjoy Him more than the things that He provides. When we see His discipline in light of His goodness, we are freed to thrive even when we’re facing hardships brought on by our disobedience.

**What can you do to help you see the goodness of God in the midst of discipline?**

# DAY 2

## READ:

Jeremiah 29:8-32

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

Jeremiah 29:10-14

## NOTES

A. W. Tozer, a giant of the Christian faith in the twentieth century, said, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”<sup>2</sup> This conclusion came after years of discipleship and intimacy with the Lord. This question is important, and there is another that is close to it: “What does God think about us?” For many, we’re not sure what God thinks about us. We don’t know if He has goodwill toward us or is out to get us. Most people feel as if God were distant from humanity.

In the book of Jeremiah, however, over and over again we see that God’s people forget what God thinks about them. They were tempted to go to false prophets for teaching and were swayed by their circumstances. At this point, a number of God’s people are in exile because of their generations-long rebellion against God and His commandments. The message that God delivered to His people through Jeremiah went something like this: “When you look for Me with all your heart, then you will certainly find Me” (see 29:13). God’s people, though, had stopped searching for God because they lost sight of who God was. But through all of their years of rebellion and idolatry, God remained the same—ready to receive His people who humbled themselves before Him.

If we’re being honest, many of us feel this same distance from God at times. We wonder if God is still ready to receive us. We’re filled with doubt about who God is and think that He’s left us because of our rebellion. But God doesn’t leave us when we turn away from Him. In fact, God’s pattern throughout all of human history has been one of faithfulness even when His people are faithless. May we remember God’s faithfulness and that all of His promises rest on the completed work of Jesus.

**In what ways are you tempted to believe that God has forsaken you? How can the gospel change that belief?**

# DAY 3

## READ:

Jeremiah 30

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

Jeremiah 30:1-3

## NOTES

In 1962, in the middle of the Vietnam War, President John F. Kennedy responded to a question about his troop build-up in Vietnam. Without using the phrase “light at the end of the tunnel,” he alluded to it.<sup>3</sup> Given how controversial the war was and all of the political backlash the country faced because of the war, he spoke of the pathway ahead being “lighter” to give the American people hope that the war could end. But to many, the idea that there was any hope at all was a long shot. And indeed, the war dragged on for over a decade after Kennedy’s words.

God’s people were probably tempted to feel hopeless in the midst of their exile in Babylon. Yet the purpose of the Babylonian exile was to give the people of God a future and a hope (Jeremiah 29:11). God never abandoned His people even though they were prone to wander from the God who loved them.

Jeremiah 30 was God’s way of saying that there was “light at the end of the tunnel,” not the wishful sort that Kennedy offered but the sure hope that only God can offer. But many of the Israelites wouldn’t get to see that light because it was for the next generation. Ultimately, the purpose of what God was saying through Jeremiah in these verses was that His promise of restoration was ultimately eschatological and messianic in nature, meaning that His promise of restoration for His people was an eternal promise that rested on the coming Savior, Jesus Christ.

As followers of Jesus on this side of the cross, we have Jesus’s finished work to help us remember and trust the faithfulness of God. Jesus is the source of our hope. He came, lived, died, and was resurrected in order to save us from our sin. He is not just the “light at the end of the tunnel,” He is also the light in the tunnel guiding us to our home in Him.

**In this season of your life, what are some ways that you find it hard to trust God? How does the gospel change that?**

# DAY 4

## READ:

Psalm 126

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

Psalm 126:1-3

## NOTES

In the 1992 film *The Mighty Ducks*, protagonist Gordon Bombay is a young lawyer driven by success. But when he has a run-in with the law for driving while under the influence, he is sentenced to community service in the form of coaching a youth league hockey team, and they are not very good at all. At the beginning of the film, Bombay hates the position that he's in and has no desire to coach the team, but we see his attitude change throughout the film. The team begins to have success, which is fueled by the changing character of their coach. Gordon Bombay leads the team to victory and finds himself becoming a new man through the process. The word "restoration" comes to mind with this plot.

In Psalm 126, we find the psalmist singing, crying out to the Lord with rejoicing, because of a return to Zion. Here, the psalmist is looking ahead to God's returning His people back to their home in the land of promise.

As sinners, we will all fail and fall in different ways because of our sin. But God is too good to let us stay there. And that's the good news of the gospel. Not only has God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to save us from our sin, but He also promises that one day He will restore everything fully and completely. Then all of the sin, hurt, and pain we experience in this world will be like a dream. It all happened and it was all real, but God's restoration will be so great that it's going to make our sin, hurt, and pain feel like a distant memory.

**How has God brought a sense and reality of restoration to a time in your life?**

# DAY 5

## READ:

Revelation 21–22

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

Revelation 21:1-5

## NOTES



### ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #76: GLORIFICATION

Glorification is the final stage in the process of salvation. It refers to the future time when a Christian reaches moral and spiritual perfection at the time of death or at Christ's return (Philippians 1:9-11; Colossians 1:22). Glorification also involves the physical perfection that we will have once our bodies have been resurrected. When we are glorified, we will have a fuller knowledge and understanding of God and His Word (Philippians 3:20-21; 1 Corinthians 13:12).

Every year, Apple comes out with a new version of the iPhone, and every year, millions of people buy the latest model. Most models don't change that drastically. There might be a new feature here or there, but overall Apple is just releasing a newer model of what has already come before. It really doesn't matter how great the newer model is either; people will buy it and Apple will make a large profit every year.

In Revelation 21, we see that God is creating "a new heaven and a new earth" (21:1), as seen by John in his vision. When we think of something new, we often think of a newer version of something else that has already been created. Often, "new" things come from some other original idea, and they carry the same essence as whatever came before. But we can't think of the new heaven and new earth this way. Scripture reveals ideas and pictures, but the resulting images in our heads are a dim reflection of the sin-filled and broken world we live in now.

But contrary to our present heaven and earth, John tells us that God will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and death shall be no more. This new heaven and new earth will be for God's people and won't have the damage or stain of sin.

This is amazing news for the Christ-follower! Our God is preparing a place for us. He is creating a place where we won't have to wrestle through the struggles of this world. In fact, He is creating an entirely different atmosphere that we can't even imagine. As believers, we can look forward to the fact that God is making all things new.

**How will the hope of "a new heaven and a new earth" change the way you live now?**

# GROUP

NOTES

**POINT 1: The day of the Lord will bring freedom** (Jer. 30:8-11).

## ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #76: GLORIFICATION

Glorification is the final stage in the process of \_\_\_\_\_ . It refers to the future time when a Christian reaches moral and spiritual \_\_\_\_\_ at the time of death or at Christ's return (Philippians 1:9-11; Colossians 1:22). Glorification also involves the physical perfection that we will have once our bodies have been \_\_\_\_\_ . When we are glorified, we will have a fuller knowledge and understanding of God and His Word (Philippians 3:20-21; 1 Corinthians 13:12).

**?** How should the doctrine of glorification affect the way we live now?

God removed our guilt and \_\_\_\_\_ and placed it on His Son, Jesus, in order that all creation would be \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ from the brokenness of sin.

**POINT 2: The day of the Lord will bring healing** (Jer. 30:12-17).

The problem with Israel's \_\_\_\_\_ wasn't just what they did but also whom they did it against, a \_\_\_\_\_ and just God. Thus, without God, they were \_\_\_\_\_ .

**?** How does sin affect a person's relationship with God?

## VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"[True spirituality] is not just that we are dead to certain things, but we are to love God, we are to be alive to him, we are to be in communion with him, in this present moment of history."<sup>4</sup>

—Francis Schaeffer (1912-1984)

God's promised \_\_\_\_\_ and healing from Babylonian captivity points to the ultimate salvation and healing God provides through \_\_\_\_\_ .



**Why might we find it difficult to rest in God's promise of healing?**

### **POINT 3: The day of the Lord will bring restoration** (Jer. 30:18-22).

God's \_\_\_\_\_ of His people from captivity, bringing \_\_\_\_\_ and thriving, foreshadows Jesus's restoration of all things to \_\_\_\_\_ .



**How have you seen God's restoration in your life and in the lives of those around you?**

Jesus is the ultimate \_\_\_\_\_ and priest, restoring our \_\_\_\_\_ with God that we may be called His people and He our God for \_\_\_\_\_ .

## **MY RESPONSE**

Because a day is coming when Jesus will return to restore all of creation, we live each day telling others of His coming kingdom so that they too might experience healing.

- **HEAD:** How should God's promise of restoration change the way you see His discipline?
- **HEART:** How does the completed work of Jesus on your behalf help you feel good about God's discipline in your life?
- **HANDS:** With whom will you share the promise of healing and restoration in Jesus this week?

NOTES

## **VOICES from THE CHURCH**

"God, after our many rebellions, treats us in salvation in the same way he treated Judah. Because of Christ, we are healed from the disease of sin. Because of Christ, we have him to stand in our defense. Because of Christ, we have hope that we are actually a part of the bride of Christ and forever wed to him. The desperation of my situation was not fake; it was real. Without Christ I was genuinely destitute. Yet the power of the gospel is stronger than my plight. My life with Christ is the light that overcomes the darkness that was my life without Christ."<sup>5</sup>

—Steven Smith

# GOD'S REWARD FOR THE FAITHFUL

**+** **SESSION IN A SENTENCE:**

Faithfulness to God is not easy, but it is rewarded.

**+** **BACKGROUND PASSAGE:**

Daniel 1

**+** **SETTING:**

In our last session, we saw the people of Judah at the very beginning of the Babylonian captivity. God had warned them time and time again that if they worshiped and served other gods, He would remove them from the land. And that's exactly what God did. In today's session, we still find ourselves at the beginning of the Babylonian captivity, but instead of hearing God speak through a prophet from outside Babylon, we will see God work through the lives of four young men in Babylon as they resolved to remain faithful to the Lord in a seemingly impossible situation.



# DAY 1

## READ:

**Daniel 1:1-16**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Daniel 1:8-16**

## NOTES

The book of Daniel begins with a Babylonian siege of Jerusalem and an initial exile of God's people. Within that group of exiles were Daniel and his friends—Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Most of us know the latter three by their Babylonian names—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These four friends cared deeply about being faithful to the Lord. In verses 8-16, we see that these men were tested when the king ordered that they be given a diet from his table. Each of the young Hebrew nobles was given a portion of the king's meat to eat and wine to drink. Daniel, however, took a stand here by saying that he would not defile himself with the king's food or his wine and that he would only eat vegetables and drink water. It's not that Daniel didn't like meat, but rather, he wanted to remain obedient to the Lord by not eating meat that had been set aside for pagan sacrifice or was considered unclean by God's law.

Daniel rightly made a big deal out of this small thing. He knew that obedience to the Lord was more important than anything else. He also trusted that the Lord would take care of him. Daniel asked to be tested by the Babylonians, and after ten days, Daniel and his friends looked healthier and better than those who took the meat and the wine. God rewarded the faithfulness of Daniel, and He would continue to do so throughout the rest of the book.

At different points in our lives, we will be asked to stay faithful in the midst of unknown circumstances. Staying faithful isn't always easy and sometimes makes our future feel uncertain. But God rewards our faithfulness to Him. However, God's reward for faithfulness is ultimately something He will fulfill in eternity. The greatest reward that we receive in heaven is also the reward we have now—Jesus. God's ways are better than our own because God's ways are what we were made for. Faithfulness to God always turns out better for us in the end.

**What are some ways the Lord has rewarded your faithfulness?**

## VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"Our faith is not meant to get us out of a hard place or change our painful condition. Rather, it is meant to reveal God's faithfulness to us in the midst of our dire situation. God does at times change our trying circumstances. But more often, he doesn't—because he wants to change us!"<sup>1</sup>

—David Wilkerson (1931-2011)

# DAY 2

## READ:

**Daniel 1:17-21**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Daniel 1:17-21**

## NOTES

Every year, millions of people make New Year's resolutions. People set goals of losing weight, working out more, reading more, watching less TV, etc. The sad thing is that most people don't actually keep these resolutions. Gyms are often flooded with people until about mid-February, and then people start dropping like flies. The weight of life comes back into reality and people abandon their resolutions.

One study shows that only 8% of Americans actually feel as if they keep their resolution throughout the year.<sup>2</sup> The problem with resolutions is that they aren't convictions. Convictions are much deeper, where the heart of a person truly lives.

Daniel and his friends had a conviction to remain obedient to the Lord at all costs. Whatever circumstances might arise, they knew that obedience to the Lord was the most important thing in their life. We see at the end of Daniel 1 that the Lord rewarded their faithfulness with knowledge and insight. God allowed these men to stand out among all others when presented before King Nebuchadnezzar. But Daniel and his friends weren't working for a reward. They weren't faithful to the Lord because they were working for a wage or looking to obtain great wisdom and insight. To them, faithfulness to God was the reward. They loved God and they loved His ways. They wanted to remain obedient to Him at all times.

This is the mind-set we should have as believers. We ought to be obedient to the Lord because of the love He shows us. We ought to keep His commandments to show the love that we have for the Father.

**How is the Lord calling you to be faithful this week?**

# DAY 3

## READ:

**Colossians 3**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Colossians 3:23-24**

## NOTES

Thus far this week, we've seen the Lord reward faithfulness. In the story of Daniel, we see that the Lord rewarded Daniel's faithfulness with immediate favor in the eyes of men. God rewarded Daniel in this way because He knew Daniel would remain faithful no matter the level of authority he was given. Daniel is a great example of how the Lord might reward us in the present.

In the book of Colossians, Paul wrote to the church at Colossae, addressing issues in the church and encouraging the believers to be transformed by the gospel. In 3:23-24, Paul challenged the believers to work hard for the Lord because they will receive an inheritance. The inheritance that Paul was referring to is the reward of eternal life and the blessings that come with being present with God. Paul was reminding them that their work for the Lord, whatever it might be, was not in vain.

Our lives in Christ are a picture of who God is. God rewards us based on our faithfulness. This does not mean that God is going to give us nice clothes, a lot of money, and a big house. The inheritance that the Lord has in mind is much greater than material wealth. The reality is that our greatest days of reward will come after we die. Our greatest treasures are being stored up in heaven (Matthew 6:19-20).

**How is our future inheritance from the Lord better than the material things of this earth?**

# DAY 4

## READ:

**Galatians 6:1-10**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Galatians 6:7-10**

## NOTES



## ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #72:

### JUSTIFICATION AND WORKS

Justification is not the result of human effort or good works but through faith in the righteousness of Christ. Although good works do not lead to justification, justification leads to good works in the life of a believer (Ephesians 2:10). Faith without works is dead (James 2:17). While good works do not establish justification, they do verify a genuine faith and make our justification evident to others.

The culture in which the Bible was written had a very agricultural landscape. The church at Galatia would have understood what Paul meant when he said that what a person sows, he reaps (6:7). Paul wanted these believers to know that their actions had consequences—some good and some bad. For whatever they did, there would be consequences that would come next. He was warning and encouraging them to sow in the Spirit so as not to reap from the flesh.

Today, this idea might be lost on us because we don't see the process of sowing and reaping as closely. Whatever life we choose to live will have consequences. Consequences aren't always bad, but they will always follow our actions.

Paul then told these believers to work for the Lord and not to grow tired of doing what is good (v. 9). He wanted them to know that in due season, they would receive a proper harvest, and this required waiting.

Waiting is a hard concept for us to grasp and an even harder process to go through. We live in an age when many things can be had in an instant. When we want to know something, we can look it up on the internet. When we want something to eat, we can go to a drive-thru and get whatever we want in a matter of minutes. But spiritual fruit from faithfulness takes time. We must do good in order to reap a proper harvest. We may see an immediate reward, but most of the time, we don't see that reward until later down the road.

It must be noted that none of this is to say that we work for our salvation. Paul's encouragement to the believers in Galatia was that they would work from their salvation, not for it. It's the same for us. We have received new life through Jesus. But Jesus didn't save us to sit and be comfortable. No, we were saved for good works. So let's not grow weary of doing good because we will reap what we sow at the proper time.

**Are you growing weary of doing good? How can you remain faithful in the face of that weariness?**

# DAY 5

## READ:

**Matthew 25**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Matthew 25:14-30**

## NOTES

The idea of investing is much older than any of us likely imagine. The financial concept has been around for a long time and remains popular today. There are trillions of dollars dedicated to investments every year, and many people are wrapped up in the business of investing.

In one of Jesus's parables in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells His disciples that the kingdom of heaven is like a man entrusting his servants with his things while he goes away on a journey. The man in the story considered the abilities of three servants and gave each a certain number of "talents," a sum of money. He wanted them to invest and increase the amount that He had given them. The first two servants are faithful and make more out of their given talents. However, the last man buries his talent in the ground and returns only the original one back to the master. The success of the first two and the mistake of the last are all things that we can learn from.

For us, the "talents" in this story represent the things God has given us to make His name known—whether it be money, time, abilities, etc. As believers, we must honor God with the things He has given us. The resources that we have are not our own. Our talents and abilities are not our own. God has given us everything we have in order to make His name known in all the world. We can choose to use them for our own gain or we can choose to use them for God's purposes and mission. In one sense, we will gain in the areas we choose to invest in. But let us choose wisely and learn to invest in things that are eternal and not things that are temporary—things that are of God, not things that are of the world.

**How can you leverage what you've been given by God to make Christ known today?**

# GROUP

NOTES

## VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"Faithfulness is our business; fruitfulness is an issue that we must be content to leave with God. God's Word will not return to him completely void, we know, but we must be willing not to see the fruits of it ourselves, or at least not immediately. Visible success in the form of instant results is not guaranteed in Christian ministry, neither for you nor for me."<sup>3</sup>

—J. I. Packer (1926-2020)

## POINT 1: Faithfulness to God is tested (Dan. 1:8).

Daniel was determined to not \_\_\_\_\_ himself, and because his \_\_\_\_\_ with God was firm, his faithfulness stood firm.

**?** What opportunities from the world tempt believers today to defile themselves?

## ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #72: JUSTIFICATION AND WORKS

Justification is not the result of human \_\_\_\_\_ or good works but through \_\_\_\_\_ in the righteousness of Christ. Although good works do not lead to justification, justification leads to good works in the life of a believer (Ephesians 2:10). Faith without works is \_\_\_\_\_ (James 2:17). While good works do not establish justification, they do verify a genuine faith and make our justification evident to others.

**?** How should the reality that we can't work to justify ourselves before God change the way we see our work for God?

## POINT 2: Faithfulness to God is affirmed (Dan. 1:9-16).

Daniel and his friends acted with wisdom and \_\_\_\_\_, both to remain faithful to God and to \_\_\_\_\_ God's image-bearers, even in the midst of a \_\_\_\_\_ and compromising situation.

Even though God was not obligated to do anything in this situation, God \_\_\_\_\_ the faithfulness of these four young men for their \_\_\_\_\_ and His glory.



**What are some ways God affirms faithfulness even if He doesn't provide for or rescue His people from trials?**

### **POINT 3: Faithfulness to God is rewarded**

(Dan. 1:17-21).

The greatest \_\_\_\_\_ that these four young men received from God was the opportunity to be His \_\_\_\_\_ to proclaim Him to the world.



**Why should we see God's using us with our gifts and talents as a reward?**

Daniel and his friends all \_\_\_\_\_ God to get more of God, not just His rewards. But God rewarded them as they understood that those rewards would be used for God's \_\_\_\_\_ .

## **MY RESPONSE**

Because Jesus has provided our greatest reward (eternal life with Him), we serve Him out of love and gratitude, not for anything else we might receive but so that others too might find salvation in Him.

- **HEAD:** What reasons do you have for remaining faithful to God even when your circumstances are difficult or dangerous?
- **HEART:** What sins or temptations do you need to confess to God today that He might forgive you and give you strength to overcome?
- **HANDS:** Who do you know that needs you to be faithful in sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with them?

NOTES

### **VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY**

"Of no profit to me will be the ends of the world and the kingdoms of this age; it is 'better for me to die' to Jesus Christ than to rule the ends of the earth. I seek him who died on our behalf; I want him who arose for our sake."<sup>4</sup>

—Ignatius of Antioch (c. 35-107)

# GOD'S JUDGMENT OF THE PRIDEFUL

**+** **SESSION IN A SENTENCE:**

God stands against the proud and will humble them.

**+** **BACKGROUND PASSAGE:**

Daniel 5

**+** **SETTING:**

Previously, we looked at Daniel 1, where we saw young Daniel and his three friends resolve to be faithful to God. In this session, we jump ahead a few decades to Daniel as an older man. Because of his resolve to remain faithful to the Lord, God blessed him and his time in exile. Here we will see God once again use Daniel as the conduit of His revelation as he pronounces judgment on King Belshazzar for his stubborn and foolish pride.



# DAY 1

## READ:

Daniel 5:1-12

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

Daniel 5:10-12

## NOTES

Have you ever adjusted to a new boss or been made to report to someone different than you were used to? What about being stuck in a position where you were required to give respect to someone who didn't give it back? The book of Daniel describes a period when the Israelites were exiled and a new kingdom was in control: the Babylonian Empire.

In Daniel 5, God's people are well into their exile from Judah, and here we find them under the rule of yet another Babylonian king. In the first twelve verses, we get a really good picture of what being under his rule was like. Belshazzar was a foolishly prideful man who thought of himself as bigger than the God of Israel. So God made Himself known in a way that terrified Belshazzar and all of his house guests.

Although this is a theme throughout the book of Daniel, if we look broader, all of history is filled with new kings and kingdoms coming and going, rising and falling. Remember studying these kings and kingdoms in history class growing up? We can remember learning of the first empires with the Egyptians, the Romans, and the modern-day mega-power governments. New rulers will always have a beginning and an ending. The book of Daniel, though, reminds us that there is a kingdom that has no end. That is the kingdom of God, from which the true king, Jesus, comes to deliver His kingdom to us all. Jesus came the first time not to condemn but to comfort, not to destroy and divide but to reveal true love and new life. His kingdom is not about political power but something greater.

Although God's kingdom is what we believe in, other kingdoms often intrude in our daily lives. Earthly kingdoms may challenge us politically, spiritually, mentally, or emotionally, monopolizing our money, our time, and our energy. But only one kingdom is eternal.

**Examine your life and answer this question: What kingdom are you serving, and who sits on the throne over your life?**

# DAY 2

## READ:

**Daniel 5:13-31**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Daniel 5:17-24**

## NOTES

## VOICES from THE CHURCH

"The arrogance of Belshazzar led to his blasphemous display before the noblemen of Babylon, and his unwillingness to learn from the example of his proud predecessor resulted in a death sentence with no chance for change. His example to us is a sobering reminder of how to treat God, his sacred belongings, and his instructive work in the lives of others. The one who wrote on the ancient wall rules the world—then, now, and forever."<sup>1</sup>

—Wendy Widder

When you are baking, the small details can be very important. For instance, when you make bread, you need to activate the yeast. The way you do that is by using warm water, and then the yeast will feed off the other ingredients involved. If you don't activate the yeast, however, the recipe will never turn out the way it's supposed to. Just as it is important to make the right decisions in the small things with baking, the same is also important in the way you build your character. Good character is something that is built over time, and so is bad character.

Belshazzar had every opportunity to see God and His sovereign rule over all the earth through what God was doing in his own life as well as what God was doing in Nebuchadnezzar's life (see Dan. 4). He was aware of these circumstances but he refused to see what God had made so plain. Not only did he refuse to see it, he also lived contrary to it. He lived as if he were in control of his own life, doing as he pleased, believing there were no consequences for himself. But God sent Daniel to make it clear that he wasn't in control and that consequences were coming.

God shows us the importance of being faithful and ethical in our small decisions in the book of Luke. He makes it clear in Luke 16:10 that those who are faithful in very little are also faithful in much, and those who are dishonest in very little are also dishonest in much. Making the right small decisions can build your character, and wrong small decisions can very easily destroy your character.

Make sure your character is rooted in the truth of God's Word. Your relationship with Jesus should be the foundation of everything you do so that you will be found faithful, resulting in positive consequences, not negative ones.

**What would you say your character is rooted in? What small steps will you take to build godly character?**

# DAY 3

## READ:

**Romans 14:1-12**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Romans 14:12**

## NOTES

In this week's narrative, we see God confronting Belshazzar not only through Daniel, but through a finger writing on the wall.

Can you imagine the day God will confront us? When we see God face to face? The moment we are standing before the King of kings and Lord of lords? The One who was and is and is to come? The One who is the ruler over all of creation? One day we get to stand in front of Him. Every single one of us will experience this moment. In Romans, Paul referenced the words written in Isaiah 45:23, where it says that every knee will bow before the Lord and every tongue will swear allegiance to Him. All of us, then, will be kneeling before our heavenly Father. We all will be placed before God, and He alone will be the One who judges each of us.

If this is the case—and it is—how important is it to remember that we will all stand before God? Why is it we spend so much time judging and comparing ourselves to others? What good is it that we despise our brothers and sisters?

Today, it is important to remember the example that Jesus set. Jesus came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10), and He did that by putting others above Himself while asking for nothing in return. Jesus didn't despise people for their sin but desired that they come to repentance. He met them where they were and loved them into the kingdom of God. Romans 14:12 tells us that each of us will have to give an account to God. Even if you've surrendered your life to God, you will have to give an account to God on how you used the freedom He won for you in Christ.

**How does knowing that Jesus doesn't despise you for your sin, but desires that you come to repentance, change the way you see other people's sin?**

# DAY 4

## READ:

Psalm 9

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

Psalm 9:7-8

## NOTES



### ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #12: GOD IS HOLY

God's holiness refers to His uniqueness in being separate from all He has created. The Hebrew word for "holy" means "separate" or "set apart." God's holiness also refers to His absolute purity. God is unstained by the evil of the world. His goodness is perfect, and the moral code we find in the Scriptures is a reflection of His holy nature. As people made in God's image, we are called to holiness.

Heads or tails? Perhaps when posed with that question, you tend to choose the same option, though there should be a 50-50 chance for either side to come up. It is conceivable that we look at God similarly. It's always easier to study and talk about the mercy and unrelenting grace God has for us. We like that "side" of God. But we find it much harder to come to terms with the "other side"—He is equally just and righteous. The truth with God, however, is not "two sides of the same coin" but God is the same God yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8)—He is always gracious and just.

We can praise God for being just and righteous because we know and believe evil should be punished. In the story of Belshazzar, the king was evil and disregarded God and His holiness, so he was judged. God is holy and just and cannot let sin go unpunished. So when we are able to recognize God's righteous rule over all of us, we are able to see a fuller picture of who He is and how much He loves each of us in sending His Son to sacrifice Himself for us.

The Lord truly has an undeniable love for us that no matter what we might do on this earth, no matter how far we might wander from Him, He still welcomes us back into His open arms. He will forever be ready to accept us exactly as we are. We see this depicted beautifully in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). This attribute of God might bring us feelings of joy and peace, but this is only true if we have received and accepted the justifying work of Christ on the cross for our sins.

The Lord judges sinners like us with His perfect righteousness (Ps. 9:8), and this should result in fear and trembling. But He also judges in Christ the sins of those who come to Jesus in faith, so we should worship and praise Him from a posture of servanthood and dependence.

**How should knowing that God declares you as righteous because of Jesus affect the way you come to Him, even when you sin?**

# DAY 5

## READ:

**John 3**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**John 3:16-21**

NOTES

Some of us might be able to read the Scripture reference for John 3:16 and immediately quote the verse. It is described as one of the most popular verses in the entire Bible. John 3:16 is a full picture of the good news of the gospel. It is easy to focus on that verse, but it is important to realize that God's gift of Jesus was not because we deserved it.

John 3:18 reminds us that we all start from a position of condemnation and judgment, but Jesus's payment on the cross covered the price of our sin. It is as if you started to receive a paycheck with your name on it from some random company you never worked for. You come to find out that someone with your exact same name was not getting paid and you were getting the paycheck. Yet instead of the other person asking for the money, he or she just allowed you to have the money even though you did nothing to deserve it. The difference is that Jesus isn't continually working; He already has paid the price in full.

Knowing and believing that what Jesus did on the cross counted for you means there is no condemnation (Romans 8:1). But Jesus didn't die for just you; He died for those around you as well. Judgment is not a question of "if," it is a question of "when." Understanding the significance of John 3:16 will help you embrace the good news yourself and help you know how to present the good news of Jesus to others.

When God allowed His people to be exiled, He not only was disciplining them, He was making Himself known in other nations. In so doing, His plan to see all people join His family and have eternal life continued through foreign nations.

**How can you use these verses today to share the love of Jesus with someone who has yet to receive Him by faith?**

# GROUP

NOTES

## VOICES from THE CHURCH

“There is no human wall so high, no human accomplishment so great, that it is secure against the judgment of God. God will bring every deed into judgment. No matter how great the man, how hidden the means, or how long the practice has continued, God ultimately will prevail. His Word is true, and his justice is sure.”<sup>2</sup>

—Bryan Chapell

### **POINT 1: The Lord confronts those who profane that which is holy** (Dan. 5:1-8).

King Belshazzar’s \_\_\_\_\_ and foolishness led him to dismiss and disdain the one and only \_\_\_\_\_ God.



**What are some ways you see an attitude of pride in our world today?**

God’s \_\_\_\_\_ was coming for Belshazzar because of his \_\_\_\_\_, idolatry, and lack of reverence for God and His holiness.

### **POINT 2: The Lord rebukes those who exalt themselves instead of Him** (Dan. 5:22-24).

Daniel \_\_\_\_\_ Belshazzar for his arrogance and sinfulness in \_\_\_\_\_ himself above God, the Creator and Sustainer of all life.



**How can all sin be connected to the idea that we exalt ourselves above God?**

### **ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #12: GOD IS HOLY**

God’s holiness refers to His uniqueness in being \_\_\_\_\_ from all He has created. The Hebrew word for “holy” means “separate” or “set \_\_\_\_\_.” God’s holiness also refers to His absolute \_\_\_\_\_. God is unstained by the evil of the world. His goodness is perfect, and the moral code we find in the Scriptures is a reflection of His holy nature. As people made in God’s image, we are called to holiness.



**What are some ways we can grow in our efforts to reflect God’s holiness?**

### POINT 3: The Lord judges those who are found to be deficient (Dan. 5:25-30).

Belshazzar's days were numbered because he didn't \_\_\_\_\_ up to God's standard of holiness, as none of us do apart from the \_\_\_\_\_ work of Christ.



**How should our own deficiency apart from Christ affect the way we see the sin of the people around us?**

God desires that all people and \_\_\_\_\_ come to Him in faith before it's too late. In that respect, we, Jesus's \_\_\_\_\_, have much work to do.

## MY RESPONSE

Because Jesus humbled Himself to be judged in our place, we seek to cast aside all pride, exalting Jesus as the Savior of the world every opportunity we get.

- **HEAD:** How does today's story inform the way you see God and His response to sin and foolish pride?
- **HEART:** We deserve death and eternal judgment, but Jesus took it for us. How does that realization give you a deeper appreciation for Jesus and His love for you?
- **HANDS:** How will you graciously confront the pride of others this week with the gospel of Jesus Christ?

NOTES

### VOICES from THE CHURCH

"As sin originated in the pride of Lucifer, so our redemption originated in the self-humbling of Jesus. We have as much of the mind of Christ as we have of His humility. This is the infallible gauge of spiritual growth."<sup>3</sup>

—Zac Poonen

# GOD'S PRESENCE IN ALL PLACES

**+** **SESSION IN A SENTENCE:**

God is present in all times and places for His people's good, most clearly evidenced in His dwelling with His people in Christ.

**+** **BACKGROUND PASSAGES:**

1 Kings 8–9; Psalm 33; Isaiah 7

**+** **SETTING:**

We have seen the devastating effect of sin and judgment in the destruction the Lord brought upon Judah and Jerusalem. He used the Babylonians to crush His own temple, conquer His own people, and to take many of them captive into exile. It would have been easy for the exiles to see themselves in a foreign land, under a foreign king, and surrounded by foreign gods and believe that God was no longer with them. But nothing could be further from the truth. God is present everywhere; God hears, cares for, and promises to dwell with His people.



# DAY 1

## READ:

**1 Kings 8**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**1 Kings 8:27-30**

## NOTES

## VOICES from THE CHURCH

"Though Christians do not need to face in any particular direction as they pray, there is a need to maintain an awareness of the presence of God. Now that we have fuller revelation of God, we know that God is not in one place (John 4:21,23-24) and therefore wherever we face, he is there . . . [O]ur posture should express our awareness that when we come before the Lord, we are before the King of all kings."<sup>1</sup>

—Musa Gotom

It can be tough to find someone you trust to give you wisdom and guidance if you are going through a hard time. Building trust in others takes spending intentional time together, having a mutual understanding of how they might approach certain situations, and most importantly, having faith that they will be present for you through the highs and the lows.

You probably wouldn't consider someone else's opinion on how to handle a situation if you don't trust them or have a relationship with them. One major way you might trust them or consider their opinion would be if you knew they had experienced something similar to what you were walking through. Your trust in them will grow a lot quicker when you know they can understand your circumstance.

In 1 Kings 8:27-30, we find Solomon crying out to God, acknowledging His omnipotence and His omnipresence. He was putting his trust in God and seeking His guidance because he knew that God had already gone before him and prepared a path for him. Deuteronomy 31:8 is a good reminder of God's true majesty in going before us, being with us, and not leaving us.

Knowing that we serve a God who has gone before us and is everywhere provides a sense of peace and comfort. When we seek the wisdom of our omnipresent Father and put our trust in Him, He will direct our paths (Prov. 3:5-6).

**In what areas or circumstances of your life are you struggling to trust God? Why do you think that is?**

# DAY 2

## READ:

**Psalm 33**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Psalm 33:13-19**

## NOTES

In 2012, a film titled *Rise of the Guardians* was released. In this movie, Jack Frost, Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, the Sandman, and the Easter Bunny were under attack by Pitch Black, who was trying to make all of the children on earth no longer believe in these beloved characters. When the belief of the children runs out, the characters' powers do as well. During the climax of the movie, they are viewing a globe of the earth to find out how many children still believe in them. They were able to look down on the world and all the children's beliefs and perspectives.

Even though this movie is fictional, it's a great image of how God might view us as illustrated by Psalm 33:13-19. As we are here serving Him and faithfully working for His kingdom, He is watching and caring for us.

But not only is God caring for us and looking at us, He also came from heaven in order to save us from sin and the power of death. And today, God is continuing to work for our good (Romans 8:28-30). No matter the situation, God is working to make us look more like Jesus through it all. We should feel comfort knowing that no matter the circumstance, our God has everything taken care of.

With this being the case, we have to be careful how we respond to His presence. The presence of God should affect the way we live, for one day we will stand before God and give an account of how we used the salvation the death of His Son won for us.

**God is faithful to you by fulfilling His promise of a Savior. What are some things that you can do today to help you remain faithful to God?**

# DAY 3

## READ:

Isaiah 7

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

Isaiah 7:10-14

## NOTES

It is always important to understand the context of a conversation. For instance, if a parent tells a child, “Get whatever you want in the store,” you might think the parents were spoiling the child. Then you find out they were in a store that only sells \$1 items and you understand the context.

In Isaiah 7:10-14, it’s equally important to look at the context surrounding this interaction between Ahaz and God. At first glance, it seems as if Ahaz did not test God because of his personal faith in Him, but the opposite was true. As a matter of fact, Ahaz was an evil king who reigned over Judah. Because of his wicked ways, he was confronted by God Himself. Because of his reluctance to believe in the one true Lord, God asked Ahaz to test Him, no matter how big or small the request. He was giving Ahaz free reign to ask of Him anything that he could think of between the heights of heaven and the depths of hell. The Lord was willing to give Ahaz that ability, but the king refused. Ahaz did not test God. It’s possible he refused because of a deep bitterness towards God and a fear he might realize just how powerful the Lord truly is.

As crazy as Ahaz might seem in this narrative, how similar are we? How many times have we denied the free gifts of grace and mercy that God has given to us? How often do we find ourselves hypercritical of our own sin as if God’s Son hasn’t removed our guilt? In Jesus, God has done everything necessary to save us from our sin. Jesus is the ultimate and eternal fulfillment of the sign that God promised to give Ahaz. The question that we have to answer is this: Are we trusting that the work of our salvation is done or are we still trying to work in our own strength?

**Are there areas in your life where you are not fully trusting in God’s finished work? If so, what are they?**

# DAY 4

## READ:

Acts 17

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

Acts 17:22-31

## NOTES

Since the beginning of time, the question of whether or not God exists has been discussed and debated. People have lost themselves arguing that He doesn't exist, and others have lost their lives standing up for their faith in God. It's hard to come to terms with the fact that this topic will never be settled for those who refuse to believe until Jesus returns. Some of the smartest people in the world have strong stances when it comes to this topic. Most theologians and scientists throughout history have differed in their beliefs and responses. Whether it be Thomas Aquinas or Albert Einstein, everyone must agree that everything, including all of humanity and the earth, had a starting point.

This proper understanding of our world is reflected in Acts 17. Even though the Athenians had many religious views and beliefs, they too acknowledged that there was a God above the rest. Even though this God whom Paul referred to might have been "unknown" to many of them, he proclaimed the one King of kings and Lord of lords. Paul was trying to help them realize that they were wasting their time trusting in their ability to have all of their bases covered. The God that they were seeking by worshiping all of the gods they worshiped was the God of the Jews—the only true God. By Him they all had life. He is in control of all. This God is a God who cannot be formed by human hands.

This is something that we too have to realize. We all have hearts that are bent toward sin and that are seeking to worship something. We chase after anything and everything, but nothing can fulfill us, protect us, and save us as God can.

**What gods around you are trying to pull your attention away from the one true God? List these idolatrous things and pray that God would help you remove them from your life.**

# DAY 5

## READ:

**Psalm 139**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Psalm 139:1-12**

## NOTES



### **ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #22: GOD IS OMNIPRESENT**

God's omnipresence refers to His presence in all time and all places simultaneously. Because God exists apart from and outside of time and space, He is not limited by their constraints (1 Kings 8:27; Acts 17:24). He is present with us wherever we are and sees all that occurs; nothing escapes His attention (Psalm. 33:14; 139:7-10; Isaiah 57:15; Jeremiah 23:23-24; Matthew 18:20). God's omnipresence is a deterrent for sin and a source of great comfort and hope for believers.

Of the top ten grossing movies of all time, six of them are superhero movies. Everyone loves a good superhero story that ends with the protagonist defeating the antagonist and saving the world. These types of movies invoke a feeling of purpose and a sense of personal courage. These types of movies almost make us feel as if we too can rise to the occasion and carry out the responsibilities of a superhero.

In some ways like a superhero, God stands over His people and He watches them in order to take care of them. But superheroes, even in their fictional stories, are limited; God is not. He knows everything and is everywhere. He knows our innermost thoughts; He knows our words before we speak them. There is nowhere that we can go to escape His gaze.

This is good news because God made us for Himself and He loves us. And even though we were all at one point in time enemies of God, now we as believers have life through His Son (Romans 5:10). This brings us to one of the biggest differences between Jesus and a superhero: Superheroes save people from their enemies, but Jesus came and died to save His enemies—us—because He loved us and didn't want to see us perish.

In loving and saving us, we now have the ability to be the vehicle by which God saves more people. When we give our lives to Jesus, we get placed on Jesus's mission. It is our responsibility and honor to now go and tell others about Jesus that they too may be saved.

**Who is someone that the Lord is calling you to take His message of salvation to?**

# GROUP

NOTES

## VOICES from THE CHURCH

"The doctrine of God's omnipresence is one of the most comforting truths in all the Bible. It reminds us that we can never outrun the power and providence of our great Lord . . . God is equidistant to his people wherever they are; he hears their prayers and receives their worship whether it is offered in giant cathedrals or tiny country churches, in the great urban centers of Europe and North America, in the steamy jungles near the equator, or at the frigid isolation of the North Pole. Every place is full of his glory."<sup>2</sup>

—Timothy George

**POINT 1: God is present to hear from His people** (1 Kings 8:27-30).

### ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #22: GOD IS OMNIPRESENT

God's omnipresence refers to His presence in all \_\_\_\_\_ and all \_\_\_\_\_ simultaneously. Because God exists apart from and outside of time and space, He is not \_\_\_\_\_ by their constraints (1 Kings 8:27; Acts 17:24). He is present with us wherever we are and sees all that occurs; nothing escapes His attention (Psalms 33:14; 139:7-10; Isaiah 57:15; Jeremiah 23:23-24; Matthew 18:20). God's omnipresence is a deterrent for sin and a source of great comfort and \_\_\_\_\_ for believers.



**What are some ways we experience the presence of God now that are mere reflections of what is to come?**

No matter where we are, no matter our circumstances, no matter the discipline we are under for our sin, the Lord is present, and He promises to \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ those who cry out in \_\_\_\_\_ name.

**POINT 2: God is present to care for His people** (Ps. 33:13-19).

Because God is omnipresent, He \_\_\_\_\_ everyone and everything, including our \_\_\_\_\_ attempts to save ourselves by our own merit.



**How do we sometimes reveal that we think we can save ourselves by our own merit?**

God keeps \_\_\_\_\_ over those who \_\_\_\_\_  
and trust Him to save us from \_\_\_\_\_ because  
He cares for us.

NOTES

### **POINT 3: God is present to dwell with His people** (Isa. 7:10-14).

Ahaz's refusal to trust God wasn't going to stop God from fulfilling His \_\_\_\_\_ to provide a Savior through the line of \_\_\_\_\_.



**What are some reasons we might find it difficult to trust God?**

Isaiah's prophecy reveals God's promise to be \_\_\_\_\_ to save and to be with His people by providing a Savior, \_\_\_\_\_, "God with us."



**How should understanding that God sent His Son as our Savior to save and be with us affect our view of God?**

## **MY RESPONSE**

Because God is ever present and nothing escapes His notice, we can find comfort and hope in all circumstances while also seeking to confess the sin in our lives, which can never be hidden from Him.

- **HEAD:** What are some ways the truth of God's omnipresence should affect the way you live?
- **HEART:** Knowing that God is with us to hear and forgive our sins, what might you need to confess to demonstrate your dependence upon Him?
- **HANDS:** How will you use the Christmas season celebrating "God with us" to help you share the gospel of Jesus with someone this week?

### **VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY**

"Were it an angel that had interposed, we might have some fears; were it a mere man, we might go beyond fear, and sit down in despair; but if it be 'God with us,' and God has actually taken manhood into union with himself, then let us 'ring the bells of heaven' and be glad."<sup>3</sup>

—Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892)

## UNIT 17

+

**TAKE REFUGE**

---

**IN THE LORD**

---



# “Jerusalem Will Be Raised Up”

by James Jackson

One of my all-time favorite movies is *The Lion King*, the original 1994 animated version, not the updated, CGI remake. Simba was the promised heir to his father's kingdom. But thanks to the evil machinations of his uncle, Scar, he was driven into exile, overwhelmed with guilt after his father's death. There, he is befriended by Timon and Pumba, a meerkat and warthog who convince him that the wilderness is actually a paradise, a place with no worries, because there are no responsibilities.

But deep down inside, Simba longs for his home. He knows he doesn't belong in exile, and when he learns that things have gone downhill in his homeland, he vows to return to face his uncle and reclaim the kingdom that is rightfully his. Timon and Pumba reluctantly accompany him back to Pride Rock, and as they survey the devastated landscape that had once been so full of life, Timon scratches his head and says, “You're gonna fight your uncle for this? Boy, talk about your fixer-upper.”

In many ways, the story of *The Lion King* resembles the story of God's people in the Old Testament. God intended Israel to be set apart for His glory, a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6). But after centuries of rebellion against God, He allowed His people to be exiled to Babylon. For seventy years, they lived in captivity; first under the Babylonians and then under the Medo-Persian Empire. Finally, Cyrus the Great issued a decree allowing the exiles to return to their homeland.

Just as Simba, Timon, and Pumba had a lot of work to do to restore Pride Rock to its former glory, Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah had a lot of work to do to restore Jerusalem. After Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the temple in 586 BC, Jerusalem was in sorry shape. The land was overgrown, the walls of the city were broken down, and the temple was in ruins. Moreover, after seventy years without a temple, the Levitical priesthood was all but obsolete.

And so, each of these men set out to restore one aspect of the “fixer-upper” Jerusalem had become. Zerubbabel rebuilt the temple, Ezra reestablished the priesthood, and Nehemiah repaired the walls. Their stories are told in the historical books of Ezra and Nehemiah, while the prophetic books of Jeremiah, Haggai, and Zechariah record the Lord’s words that motivated the work.

### A QUESTION OF PRIORITIES

God had a very practical approach to restoring Jerusalem. The emphasis for the first wave of exiles was to reinstitute sacrifices and burnt offerings. The people needed to re-learn how to worship God properly. So before any work was done on the temple, a head count revealed how many of the returning exiles were of the Levitical priesthood (Ezra 2). Then the returnees rebuilt the altar and restored the observance of the Feast of Booths (Ezra 3:1-7).

Only then did Zerubbabel begin his work on rebuilding the temple (Ezra 3–6). The work did not come easily. They were opposed by enemies and for several years did no work at all. But finally, after years of stops and starts, the temple was completed.

We tend to think,  
“We just need a bigger  
sanctuary, and then  
we’ll really be able  
to worship God.”  
But that’s not the  
pattern we see in Ezra.

Notice that God prioritized worship over building a physical landmark. The altar was rebuilt and the Feast of Booths was observed before a single stone was laid on top of another in the temple. Have you ever noticed how often we get that backwards in our modern church building campaigns? We tend to think, “We just need a bigger sanctuary, and then we’ll really be able to worship God.” But that’s not the pattern we see in Ezra.

### THE TEMPLE WASN’T THE MOST IMPORTANT THING

Zechariah’s prophetic ministry took place at roughly the same time as the events of Ezra 1–6. Zechariah 1:1 says that the

God prioritized worship over  
building a physical landmark.

## Believers today are God's temple, and He reveals Himself to us when we make worshipping Him our priority.

word of the Lord came to Zechariah in the eighth month of the second year of Darius, about four years before the temple was dedicated, according to Ezra 6:15. However, much of Zechariah's prophecy concerns events that would take place far in the future. Zechariah prophesied that one day the Lord would open a fountain in Jerusalem that would cleanse her inhabitants from sin and uncleanness (Zechariah 13:1). This imagery points to the blood and water that flowed from Jesus's side when He was pierced by the Roman soldier (John 19:34). This reminds me of that beautiful old hymn:

There is a fountain filled with blood  
Drawn from Immanuel's veins; And  
sinners, plunged beneath that flood,  
Lose all their guilty stains.<sup>1</sup>

Zechariah's prophecy was fulfilled outside the temple! Indeed, the temple was being shaken by a violent earthquake at the moment Jesus died (Matthew 27:51-54).

God then gave Zechariah a glimpse even further into the future, long after the second temple was destroyed in AD 70. Through Zechariah, God revealed that there will come a day when the Lord will

ultimately triumph over all His enemies (Zechariah 14). This prophecy will be fulfilled when Jesus returns.

This unit of study covers a dizzying span of centuries, from the return of the first exiles five hundred years before Jesus to the death and resurrection of Jesus to the eventual return of Jesus. We see God revealed in practical planning (Zerubbabel) as well as apocalyptic prophecy (Zechariah). But through it all, we also see that God is truthful. He is a God who keeps His promises, even working through pagan kings to bring His people home from exile. He is a God who can be trusted to fulfill every one of the promises He made through His prophets Jeremiah and Zechariah.

God does not need an earthly temple in order to receive our worship or reveal His plan. Believers today are His temple, and He reveals Himself to us when we make worshipping Him our priority. And God desires to do a restoration project in the lives of His children today!



# A PEOPLE RETURNED

**+** **SESSION IN A SENTENCE:**

God is faithful to fulfill His promises and will bring restoration.

**+** **BACKGROUND PASSAGE:**

Ezra 1–2

**+** **SETTING:**

After spending seventy years in exile, away from their homeland, the Lord brought upheaval to kingdoms of the world, resulting in His people going home. Belshazzar and the Babylonians were overthrown by the Persians, and the result was a change in policy towards those who had been deported from Judah. God would bring His chosen people back to the land of promise—the land that He had given to Abraham and that Israel had settled during the days of Joshua.

# DAY 1

## READ:

**Proverbs 21**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Proverbs 21:1**

## NOTES

Sit and watch a river flow and you will notice how every drop of water is carried along. The bends and twists of a river, the drop in the landscape, and the levelling out at the entrance to a larger body of water cause the flow to be directed to their end. But when irrigation is needed to a nearby field, a farmer may channel the water and regulate its flow. By shaping the banks or by trenching a new path, the water can be redirected as needed.

In a similar way, God does not have to coerce or force the hearts of political leaders to get them to do what He desires. By His providence and gracious hand, the Lord is able to move and guide them to accomplish His purposes. He may simply move the heart of a leader by bringing about circumstances that guide the flow where He wants it to go. Like the banks of a river direct the stream, so the Lord can move the path of history in ways that might surprise us as human beings.

The Lord brought Cyrus to power, just as He had foretold through the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 44:28–45:1), and through Cyrus, He brought about the return of the exiles. By bringing down Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians and raising up Cyrus and the Persians, Scripture was fulfilled.

History is not outside of the control of God. No human ruler is supreme. If the Lord can fulfill His purposes by bringing about circumstances that move a king's heart, how much more is the Lord able to direct your steps and change your path.

**Reflect upon your own life. How has the Lord brought about circumstances to bring you to Himself?**

# DAY 2

## READ:

**Ezra 1:1-4**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Ezra 1:4**

## NOTES



### **ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #11: GOD IS UNCHANGING**

God's being and attributes, along with the ethical commitments He has given, cannot change. This means, among other things, that God is committed to being God and that He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. God's unchanging nature is good news for Christians, for it guarantees that God does not change His mind or go back on His promises. Christians can find assurance and peace of mind in knowing that the God who brought them out of darkness into His marvelous light is the God who will carry them through into eternity.

The thought of your home being robbed or cleaned out by someone is a terrifying thought and experience, especially if family heirlooms are taken.

When the Lord's house was raided and destroyed by the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar, the precious and sacred furniture and artifacts that had been made centuries earlier under Moses's leadership had been removed and taken to Babylon, placed in their temple, and treated as spoils of war. The Babylonian's actions made it appear as though the God of Israel had been subdued and subjugated to servitude under the Babylonian regime.

When Cyrus overthrew the Babylonians and the Persians came to power, his returning and reinstatement of the temple furniture and artifacts to the Jews would have seemed absolutely incredible. Like stolen objects being returned to their rightful owner, the Lord's sacred objects had been returned so that His people might rebuild the temple and restore proper worship to the God who rules over all.

Yet this reinstatement of the Lord's belongings was also coupled with the neighbors of the Jewish people also giving them items to rebuild the Lord's temple. God had not only moved Cyrus's heart to rebuild the house of the Lord, He also moved the hearts of people around the Jews to see the restoration of the worship of God.

Centuries earlier, God had moved the hearts of the Egyptians to a similar effect. At the first exodus, the Jewish people received gifts from their neighbors that would go toward the building of the tabernacle (see Exodus 3:21-22; 11:2; 12:35-36). Now several centuries later, God was moving people's hearts again so that His temple might be restored and His people might be encouraged in the proper worship of their sovereign God.

**What should the believer's attitude be toward giving to the work and ministry of the church?**

# DAY 3

## READ:

**Ezra 1:5-11**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Ezra 1:5**

## NOTES

After a great fire, there is a lot of work to do to rebuild and restore a house. The old rubble has to be cleared. The structure has to be secured. In some cases, the fire has caused such incredible destruction that the foundation has to be laid again and the entire building has to start from scratch. It can take months, sometimes years, to rebuild. Insurance claims and adjustments have to be made, building materials and contractors have to be secured, and then the work can begin!

After the Babylonians invaded Jerusalem, they destroyed the house of the Lord, taking all of the sacred items and burning the building (see 2 Chronicles 36:15-19). The size of the task to rebuild this temple after all of this destruction was enormous. It would take a lot of motivation and encouragement. Even with the blessing of Cyrus (Ezra 1:2-4), the people would still have to do the hard work of clearing away the rubble and starting over.

Where would the motivation come from to undertake this enormous task? We are told that it was God who roused the spirit of the people to go and rebuild the house of the Lord. God would stir the hearts of the people. God would cause the people to long for the restoration of worship. God would bring them back to their homeland with the passion and drive to honor the Lord.

Worship begins with God moving the hearts of His people to love and adore Him. And when God moves in their hearts, God's people will desire to honor Him with all of their lives, showing that He is worthy of praise.

**How does the Lord's grace motivate you to worship and adore Him?**

# DAY 4

## READ:

Ezra 1

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

Ezra 1:7

## NOTES

Some people enjoy the hunt for hidden treasures. Taking a GPS device and directions from online websites, people will track down hidden treasures that other people have put in particular locations for others to find. This worldwide phenomenon known as geocaching allows people to discover things that have been placed in unusual spots. In rural areas, geocaches have been hidden in hollow logs, under bridges, or in the crook of trees. In urban areas, these items are hidden in the crevices of buildings, along highway embankments, and under permanent structures. People love to find these items, bring them out, and look at what has been hidden away.

Even better than searching for hidden treasure, however, is to have that treasure brought out to you. When God's people were preparing to return to Jerusalem, Cyrus brought out the greatest treasure the people could long for: the articles from the temple. These items were of great significance for Israel. These were not just hidden treasures that had sentimental value. These items connected Israel to their past, recalling God's saving work at the first exodus. Now, having these items back would have brought to mind God's saving work among His people so long ago and given the people assurance that God was doing something similar in their day.

But these lost treasures were not just a reminder of a past salvation, they would tell the people of a new exodus. God was bringing His people home and establishing them in the land that He had promised to them so long ago.

**What is the significance of some items you may have kept to remind you of God's work of salvation in your life?**



# DAY 5

## READ:

**Ezra 2**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Ezra 2:2**

## NOTES

## VOICES from THE CHURCH

"God knows who we are—he knows our names. We have become sons and daughters of the King (Galatians 3:26-29; Ephesians 1:5). We need to live so that we will honour both our family names and the name of our Lord. Bring honour to the name of 'Christian,' as one who follows Christ."<sup>1</sup>

—Africa Study Bible

We typically choose names for children with great intentionality. We may choose a name to honor someone we love, to reflect an important event in our lives, or because of the special meaning of the name. Our children receive our last name as a reminder of their history and connection to us and their family heritage.

The names in the Old Testament functioned in a similar way but often with a greater degree of importance. Names were given as an expression of hope in the future, a connection to the past, and sometimes as a prophetic expression of what was to come. Zerubbabel was one of those names. Raised as a child in exile, Zerubbabel was born from the royal family line of King David. His grandfather was one of the last kings of Judah before the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, laid siege to destroy Jerusalem (see 2 Kings 24–25).

Yet for all of his family's failures to live up to the ideal kingship, Zerubbabel was given the prominent place in the list of returnees. His name means "seed of Babylon," and he led the returnees back from captivity to rebuild the temple and restore the worship of the Lord in the land. Along with the other eleven leaders (see Nehemiah 7:7), Zerubbabel represented the hope of a restored Israel. Zerubbabel carried in himself out of Babylon the hope for the seed that would come from the woman and crush the serpent (see Genesis 3:15), for through him would the line of David carry on and lead to the promised Christ (see Ezra 3:2; Matthew 1:12).

What's in a name? For the people who came with Zerubbabel, there was the promise of God of something new after exile—a future with hope and promise that the Lord would fulfill His purposes through His people.

**Why do people spend so much time deciding on a name for a child? What does your name mean and is there significance behind it?**

# GROUP

NOTES

## VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"To say that God is sovereign is to declare that He is 'The Governor among the nations' (Psa. 22:28), setting up kingdoms, overthrowing empires, and determining the course of dynasties as pleaseth Him best."<sup>2</sup>

—A. W. Pink (1886-1952)

### **POINT 1: The Lord moved a leader to fulfill His word** (Ezra 1:1-4).

Through Cyrus, God stayed true to His \_\_\_\_\_, fulfilling His word in bringing the \_\_\_\_\_ of Israel back to their land.

**?** How should knowing the Lord fulfill His promises cause us to read His Word?

Throughout \_\_\_\_\_, including Cyrus's actions, God is sovereign over all, bringing about His \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

**?** What difference should God's providence, His control of all things, make in how we view history?

### **POINT 2: The Lord roused the people to rebuild His house** (Ezra 1:5-11).

As God is in \_\_\_\_\_ of all things, He stirred the hearts of His people to long for the \_\_\_\_\_ land, just as He does for us today.

The Lord roused the hearts of leaders and His people so that proper \_\_\_\_\_ of Him could be \_\_\_\_\_ and sustained.

**?** How should God's care for the details of His worship move our hearts to worship Him better?

### **POINT 3: The Lord restored the families to their homes** (Ezra 2:1-2).

#### **ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #11: GOD IS UNCHANGING**

God's being and attributes, along with the ethical commitments He has given, cannot change. This

means, among other things, that God is committed to being God and that He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. God's unchanging \_\_\_\_\_ is good news for Christians, for it guarantees that God does not change His mind or go back on His promises. Christians can find \_\_\_\_\_ and peace of mind in knowing that the God who brought them out of darkness into His marvelous light is the God who will carry them through into \_\_\_\_\_ .



**How might God's unchanging nature encourage you during hard times?**

God returned His people back to the land as part of His promise to \_\_\_\_\_ them and give them a king and priest through the line of David, which is ultimately fulfilled in \_\_\_\_\_ .

## MY RESPONSE

Because we have been freed from sin and have experienced God's kindness, we make worship our first priority so that others will see the goodness of the Lord.

- **HEAD:** How does the Jewish return from exile give you hope that God is working out your salvation for your good and His glory?
- **HEART:** What are some ways that you can praise God together with your group for His work of salvation in your life?
- **HANDS:** Who will you talk to this week about God's goodness in saving you from sin and death through faith in Jesus?

## VOICES from THE CHURCH

"Look at the influence the Lord has! Are there members of your family who are not interested in building the church, the temple of the Holy Spirit? Ask the Lord to stir their hearts. Do you have friends or neighbors or people in your life that you would love to see moved to join the cause of covering the stage God built with His glory? Do you see the rulers of the world and fear the detrimental effect they could have on the gospel? Seek the Lord to stir their hearts. He can do this great work."<sup>3</sup>

—James M. Hamilton Jr.

# A PEOPLE CLEANSED

**+** **SESSION IN A SENTENCE:**

A day is coming when God will win the victory for His people and reign over them forevermore.

**+** **BACKGROUND PASSAGE:**

Zechariah 13–14

**+** **SETTING:**

God had set His people free from captivity in Babylon. Yet the people still needed spiritual renewal and repentance. Having returned to the land, the prophet Zechariah called God’s people to mourn over their sins. The Lord promised to give to His people a new spirit, one of grace, so they would be able to see the One who was coming to be “pierced” for their sins (Zech. 12:10). In the face of dark times, the Lord will remind His people that just as He won previous battles, He will win the future battle so that their future will be secure forever with Him.

# DAY 1

## READ:

**Zechariah 13**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Zechariah 13:1**

## NOTES

William Cowper is probably best known as a great hymn writer. Some of his most popular hymns include “God Moves in a Mysterious Way” and “O for a Closer Walk with God.” But his best known hymn comes from Zechariah 13:1. It was because of this passage that Cowper penned his own experience of “that day” he was set free from sin and death.

Cowper would spend his life dealing with depression. At a young age, his mother died. This loss shook him deeply. He would attempt to busy himself with schooling to keep his mind occupied. But later, his father passed and a hope for marriage was rejected on account of his lowly estate. Then an overwhelming circumstance regarding his occupation and reputation led him to consider and attempt suicide numerous times before his desire for self-destruction was discovered by friends and he was institutionalized.

During this time, he was cared for by a Christian friend who shared the liberating power of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the One who was pierced for his sins. Cowper’s experience of God’s cleansing power caused him to say, “Immediately I received strength to believe it and all the full beams of the Sun of Righteousness shone upon me. I saw the sufficiency of the atonement he had made, my pardon was sealed in his blood, and all the fullness and completeness of his justification. In a moment I believed and received the Gospel.”<sup>1</sup>

In this hymn, Cowper expressed the truths of Zechariah 13:1:

There is a fountain filled with blood  
Drawn from Immanuel’s veins;  
And sinners, plunged beneath  
that flood, Lose all their guilty stains . . .  
E’er since by faith I saw the stream  
Thy flowing wounds supply,  
Redeeming love has been my theme,  
And shall be till I die.<sup>2</sup>

**What are some effects the cleansing work of Christ has had upon your heart?**

# DAY 2

## READ:

Hebrews 10

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

Hebrews 10:21-22

## NOTES

Spend time in any sports venue and you'll find that there are points where access is denied. Players are kept safe in the locker rooms and on the field of play. Unless you have security clearance, those who are entrusted with keeping the premises safe will forbid access. Those who have security passes, however, are allowed access into areas that others cannot go.

The same is true with God's holy presence. Those who come to worship the Lord and come before His throne of grace do not have access on their own merits. They need to show that they have received "security clearance" and are not going to barge in on their own terms.

Christians come to God in prayer and worship in the name of Jesus Christ. His cleansing work washes us clean from all of our sin and impurity. But His cleansing work does more than just remove our filth. He gives us His righteousness. Like a security pass, we are given access into the most holy place—the throne room of God—by the blood of His Son. We do not have to feel guilty coming before God when we come in the name of Jesus Christ. We come with hearts sprinkled clean and our consciences purified.

Christ's atoning work ought to give us confidence. It means that God does not merely tolerate us coming before Him. He is not only going to act with graciousness and kindness towards us, He welcomes us into His presence with joy as His own children. Because of Jesus Christ, we can come as those who have been redeemed from death, restored from the fall, and forgiven of our sin.

**How do you feel about entering God's presence with boldness and assurance of faith on account of Christ's death? Why?**

# DAY 3

## READ:

**Zechariah 14:1-7**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Zechariah 14:3**

## NOTES

## VOICES from THE CHURCH

“God does not always settle His accounts . . . in our lifetimes, or even in centuries of history. Injustice and great wickedness seem sometimes to go unaddressed by our holy and righteous God. But He will settle His accounts. Jesus will come to rule the world in God’s justice and righteousness. The kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ. And He shall reign forever and ever, hallelujah! His certain victory, in His own time, gives us reason to praise Him and to give thanks in every circumstance.”<sup>3</sup>

–Stephen Rummage

When Richard Nixon assumed the office of President of the United States, he attempted to become one of the most famous presidents in history and wanted to secure his success by having all of his Oval Office conversations recorded.

As an investigation proceeded around a break-in that had occurred at the Democratic National Headquarters, the trail led to a cover up by the President. As the Watergate scandal unfolded, the very tapes that Nixon had used to record his conversations were used against him, resulting in his resignation before impeachment charges could be brought against him.

The Lord uses human pride to bring judgment upon those who continue in sin. When people try to succeed through immoral schemes, the Lord brings their plans to nothing. In Zechariah 14, the ungodly nations come against Jerusalem at the prompting of the Lord. But in an act of great irony, the Lord who gathers the nations at Jerusalem becomes the One who fights against these very same nations.

God has a way of fighting for His people when times and situations look impossible. When Israel fled Egypt and found themselves pressed against the Red Sea as Pharaoh and his army came against them, Moses told the people not to be afraid and to stand firm for the Lord would fight for them (Exodus 14:13-14).

This great reversal is the way of God. When things look hopeless, we remember that God fights for us. He will vindicate His people who bear His name. So don’t be afraid, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord who fights for you!

**In what trials do you need stand firm in faith today?**

# DAY 4

## READ:

**Zechariah 14:1-7**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Zechariah 14:4**

## NOTES

On October 17, 1989, just moments before Game 3 of the World Series was to begin, a 6.9 magnitude earthquake struck the Bay Area. Candlestick Park, the site of Game 3, suffered substantial damage. Television viewers watched as things rattled until the power went out. The damage would be widespread across Oakland and San Francisco. A portion of the double-deck Nimitz Freeway in Oakland would collapse, and several people would lose their lives in the quake.

When the ground beneath your feet shakes, it can leave you unsettled. The foundation that you put your feet upon feels secure until it starts to rattle and shake. Then you can wonder if anything is secure.

One day, God will shake the heavens and the earth (Haggai 2:6; Hebrews 12:26-28). He will plant His feet upon the mountains, and the nations will tremble and be defeated. While the shaking of the earth might cause us to fear, God has promised to shake the heavens and the earth, and through these cosmic events, He will establish His kingdom and His reign.

Once the heavens and the earth are shaken and God establishes His rule, He will set up a kingdom that cannot be shaken (Hebrews 12:28). Because we are going to receive a kingdom that cannot be shaken, we can have confidence that God's covenantal love will remain (Isaiah 54:10). We can be thankful that we are secure in His love, and we can serve God with reverence and awe (Hebrews 12:28).

**How should God's promise of His coming kingdom change your daily perspective?**



# DAY 5

## READ:

**Zechariah 14:8-21**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Zechariah 14:9**

## NOTES



### **ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #80: PEOPLE OF GOD**

Scripture describes the church as “the people of God” (2 Corinthians 6:16). Comprised of both Jew and Gentile, the church is created by God through the atoning death of Christ. The term “church” is used in two senses—of individual local churches composed of people who have covenanted together under the lordship of Christ and of the universal church composed of all believers in Christ in all times. As the people of God, the church seeks to live under God’s ruling care while we are protected and cared for by Him.

In *The Return of the King*, J. R. R. Tolkien’s final novel in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Aragorn arises after being crowned. The response from those who watched is described with vivid detail:

All that beheld him gazed in silence, for it seemed to them that he was revealed to them now for the first time. Tall . . . he stood above all that were near; ancient of days he seemed and yet in the flower of manhood; and wisdom sat upon his brow, and strength and healing were in his hands, and a light was about him.

Then Aragorn’s steward cried out, “Behold the King!”<sup>4</sup>

This description is an apt summary of the Lord’s return in Zechariah 14. When the Lord sets His feet upon the mountain of Jerusalem, defeats His enemies, and sets up His reign, He will reverse all of the effects of the curse that have afflicted the world since Genesis 3.

What Zechariah anticipated on that day is that the people will behold the glory of the Lord and see Him as He truly is. There will be no confusion about who is the true ruler and king over all of the earth. The Lord, victorious, will reign forever and ever.

There is coming a day when all of the Lord’s enemies will be defeated and will be crushed underneath His feet. When that happens, there will be no rivals to His throne, no challenges to His glory, and no confusion about who is Lord and God alone.

**What hope does the promise of Jesus’s victorious reign give you for today?**

# GROUP

NOTES

## **POINT 1: The Lord will cleanse the impurities of His people** (Zech. 13:1-4).

God foretold of a day when the hearts of His people would be \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ to follow Him perfectly.



**What responses should people have to God's offer of forgiveness and cleansing from sin?**

## **ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #80: PEOPLE OF GOD**

Scripture describes the church as “the people of God” (2 Corinthians 6:16). Comprised of both Jew and Gentile, the church is created by God through the atoning death of \_\_\_\_\_. The term “church” is used in two senses—of individual \_\_\_\_\_ churches composed of people who have covenanted together under the lordship of Christ and of the \_\_\_\_\_ church composed of all believers in Christ in all times. As the people of God, the church seeks to live under God's ruling care while we are protected and cared for by Him.

## **POINT 2: The Lord will fight and win the victory for His people** (Zech. 14:1-7).

Zechariah reminded the hopeless nation of Judah that the Lord \_\_\_\_\_ for His people in His \_\_\_\_\_, and He is always \_\_\_\_\_.



**What are some ways we can remind ourselves of God's faithfulness and eternal victory in the midst of our trials?**

## **VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY**

“There are no ‘ifs’ in God's world. And no places that are safer than other places. The center of His will is our only safety.”<sup>5</sup>

—Betsie ten Boom (1885-1944)

The day of the Lord points to Christ's \_\_\_\_\_ ,  
when He will \_\_\_\_\_ the nations and gather His  
people in final triumph on an undisclosed day.

NOTES

### **POINT 3: The Lord will reign with provision and security for His people** (Zech. 14:8-11).

On the day of the Lord, a flow of water will  
\_\_\_\_\_ the world as the Lord proclaims His  
ultimate \_\_\_\_\_ over all.



**What are some ways you can show the world that  
Jesus is King over your life?**

Zechariah spoke about the \_\_\_\_\_ Jerusalem, a  
place that will bring peace and \_\_\_\_\_  
for God's people on the day of the Lord at  
Christ's \_\_\_\_\_ .



**How should the promise of Christ's coming kingdom  
cause you to live today?**

## **MY RESPONSE**

Because the Lord is returning, we live with urgency  
each day telling all others about salvation found only  
in Him so that they too might experience His victory.

- **HEAD:** How should Christ's final victory give you encouragement for today?
- **HEART:** How will you express your gratitude for the Lord's victory over sin?
- **HANDS:** With whom will you share God's mighty works to restore, save, and provide for sinners?

### **VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY**

"Lo! He comes with clouds  
descending, once for ev'ry  
sinners slain; thousand,  
thousand saints attending  
swell the triumph of his train:  
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia! Christ  
reveals his endless reign."<sup>6</sup>

—Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

# A TEMPLE RESTORED

**+** **SESSION IN A SENTENCE:**

God moves His people to obey Him so that He might be glorified.

**+** **BACKGROUND PASSAGE:**

Ezra 2–6

**+** **SETTING:**

The exiles in Babylon were graciously granted permission to return home to Judah with the express purpose of rebuilding the temple of the Lord. Immediately, they set out to lay the foundation, which resulted in cries of joy from the young but tears from the old. But then outside opposition to this work set in with physical and political threats. The result was a delay in the construction and a loss of motivation in the people. They would need a prophetic word and the Lord's intervention to help them complete the house of God.

# DAY 1

## READ:

**Ezra 4:1-5,24-5:17**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Ezra 5:1-2**

## NOTES

In the movie *Hoodwinked*, the classic story of Little Red Riding Hood is retold as a police investigation, taking the points of view of each of the different major characters to explain the broader story of what has gone on. In what appears to be a clear-cut case after Little Red Riding Hood is interviewed, the story becomes much more complex when the Big Bad Wolf's side of the story is heard. Suddenly, others are brought into the investigation and the story becomes much more nuanced and complex as each character is interviewed.

The Bible brings together many different angles to help us understand what God's people were dealing with at the time of the temple's rebuilding. The book of Ezra tells us that God's people had experienced growing opposition to the rebuilding of the temple. Over time, this discouragement became so great that the work ceased. While Ezra speaks of the ministries of Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5:1), their ministries disclose that there had been different but complementary ministries going on. While Haggai had brought the word of the Lord with rebuke and correction, Zechariah spoke of a glorious day that lay ahead in the future. While Haggai spoke of the people building their own homes while the house of the Lord was rejected, Zechariah spoke of a day when the cleansing waters would flow from the temple and bring purification for sins.

Together, Ezra, Haggai, and Zechariah present a fuller picture of the problems and the ministry needed to complete the task. Just as God had stirred the spirit of Cyrus to have the temple rebuilt and the hearts of the people to return, so the word of the Lord stirred the hearts of His people by rebuking, correcting, and encouraging them to complete the Lord's work.

**What are some ways the Word of God has encouraged you when you needed a change of perspective?**

# DAY 2

## READ:

Ezra 6:1-15

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

Ezra 6:14

## NOTES



### ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #19: GOD IS INFINITE

God's infinity means that there are no boundaries on His qualities and existence (Job 11:7-9; Psalm 147:5). For instance, God is infinite when it comes to space and time, meaning He is not confined by material space nor is He restricted by time since He is timeless (Psalm 90:1-2). God's infinity also extends to His knowledge of things as well as His power to do all things according to His will.

In 1993, Joseph Francis was working for R/Greenberg Associates in Manhattan. He had taken many computer-generated color images and reworked them so that they had similar hues. Each piece was its own photograph. But when stitched together, Francis had created *Live from Bell Labs*—a poster that looked like a larger picture of a face. This type of computer-generated photography is called a “photomosaic.” It is the act of reworking many pictures together to form one larger picture when they are all brought together.

History often looks like little individual photos to us, random, disconnected, and strange. But behind all of the events of history is the God who intervenes so that His purposes, plans, and power are put on display for all to see, if they have the eyes of faith.

In Ezra 6:14, several separate but important pieces of history come together to form the temple of the Lord. First, there is the proclamation of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. These two men spoke the word of the Lord, and their messages motivated Zerubbabel and Jeshua, along with the rest of the leaders of Israel, to rebuild the temple (see Ezra 5:2). Second, the Lord had roused the heart of Cyrus to send the Jewish exiles home to rebuild the temple of the Lord (see Ezra 1:1). Finally, the Lord had moved in His people's hearts to obey His commands and supplied their needs through the edict of Darius (see Ezra 6:1-12). The combined result of these individual moments of history was the temple of the Lord being rebuilt.

**What are some ways you can see God working history together for His glory and your good?**

# DAY 3

## READ:

**Ezra 6:16-22**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Ezra 6:19-21**

## NOTES

Traditions are meaningful for us when they connect us to the past, reminding us of the significance of events long ago. We celebrate Christmas by giving gifts, remembering God's greatest gift to us in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. On Veteran's Day, those who gave their lives and fought for our freedom are remembered.

For the Jew, Passover is one of the most meaningful connections to the past. By celebrating this holiday on the fourteenth day of the first month of the Jewish calendar, Jews remember a high point in Israel's salvation history. On the night when the angel of death came through the land of Egypt, those who had the blood of a spotless lamb upon their doorposts were spared, but those who didn't experienced the death of the firstborn son in their midst. Because of God's severe judgment on Egypt, the children of Israel were released from bondage and slavery so that they could be free and worship the Lord (see Exodus 12).

Today, Christians remember a related and greater salvation event by partaking of the Lord's Supper (see 1 Corinthians 11:17-34). In this special meal, we remember and celebrate our salvation from sin. We remember that during a Passover two thousand years ago, the Lord Jesus gave His life as the Lamb of God to take away our sins and free us from the power of sin and the punishment of death (Mark 14:12,22-26; John 1:29). In Ezra 6:21, those who cleansed themselves from the uncleanness of the land could join Israel in celebrating their new exodus. And today, those who have turned from sin and trusted in Christ remember that Jesus is our Passover Lamb (1 Corinthians 5:7).

Communion is more than a tradition. It is a reminder that our story connects with the history of the people of God throughout all the ages, people who ultimately have been rescued from sin and death and brought out by God's great exodus work in Christ Jesus.

**What can you do to make your next participation in the Lord's Supper more meaningful?**

# DAY 4

## READ:

Ezra 6

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

Ezra 6:22

## NOTES

Everyone loves a good celebration. Decorations are put up to mark the occasion. A special meal is cooked or a decadent dessert is prepared for everyone to enjoy. At a birthday party, everyone chimes in to sing “Happy Birthday!” Presents are given at many celebrations. Candies or special treats might be handed out. Joy resounds at a party!

When God’s people completed the temple, Ezra 6:22 says that they celebrated with great joy because the Lord had made them joyful. This was a time for celebration, and they had many reasons to celebrate. After years of hard work, the temple was finally complete. The Lord had roused the heart of Cyrus to send the Jewish people back to their land (Ezra 1:1), and later Darius commanded that no one should oppose the Jewish efforts in rebuilding the temple (Ezra 6:11-12). After opposition had dried up their resolve so that construction was halted, they had received the Lord’s encouragement through the prophetic words of Zechariah and Haggai to finish the task (Ezra 5:2).

As the people stood looking at the completed temple, all of God’s work in bringing that day to reality would have brought the people great joy. The building was finished. The priests and Levites were in place to fulfill their tasks. And joy flowed from the hearts of the people.

When we look over our lives with the eyes of faith, the Lord will enable us to see that He has been working out His glorious purposes in our lives. As we stop and reflect on His gracious providence, our hearts should respond with resounding praise to God for His great love for us!

**What ways can you reflect upon God’s work in your life and find joy in Him today?**



# DAY 5

## READ:

**Psalm 115**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Psalm 115:3**

## NOTES

## VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"Nothing whatever, whether great or small, can happen to a believer, without God's ordering and permission . . . There is no such thing as 'chance,' 'luck,' or 'accident' in the Christian's journey through this world. All is arranged and appointed by God. And all things are 'working together' for the believer's good."<sup>1</sup>

—J. C. Ryle (1816-1900)

No one likes to be around people who are perpetually unhappy, miserable, and cranky. Their inability to see life from any other perspective can bring cloudy skies to the sunniest of days. Like a pin to a balloon, joylessness pops the enthusiasm out of life.

Could you imagine what would happen if God were not happy? What would the world be like if God were a celestial being who was ornery, cranky, and frustrated that He didn't get His way? Would there be any happiness to be found by anyone if this were the nature of God? He would be someone we would avoid.

But God is in the heavens and He does whatever pleases Him. His happiness, found in the fact that His purposes cannot be frustrated, is the foundation for any of our joy in the Lord. Because there is no one greater than the Lord, because there is no power higher than His alone, the sovereign Lord is working out all things for His glory and good pleasure.

God's sovereign hand ought to fuel our joy in the Lord. Because nothing is outside of His purposes and plans, the hardest things, the most trying events, and the greatest sorrows all bow down and serve the Lord's good purposes. Nothing in your life will be wasted. No pain that is experienced today will thwart God's good pleasure to accomplish that which will bring you the most joy in this world and the next—to be conformed into the image of His Son.

Take heart! God is in control! Since He is sovereign, you can count every trial as working out pure joy in your life to form you into the person God wants you to be (James 1:2-4)!

**How can thinking rightly about God's sovereignty give you joy in the Lord today?**

# GROUP

NOTES

## POINT 1: The people obey because of divine encouragement (Ezra 4:24–5:2).

The Jews who had returned from exile allowed \_\_\_\_\_ and time to \_\_\_\_\_ them from their mission, causing the delay of what they were sent to \_\_\_\_\_ .

### ? Why is it easy to get distracted from the Lord's work?

The \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah \_\_\_\_\_ God's people to obey God's will and commands.

### ? Why is it important to listen to godly wisdom from God's people?

## POINT 2: The people succeed because of divine intervention (Ezra 6:13-15).

God works \_\_\_\_\_ , even in people who don't trust Him, to accomplish His purposes, as seen in the work of the \_\_\_\_\_ temple.

## ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #19: GOD IS INFINITE

God's infinity means that there are no boundaries on His qualities and existence (Job 11:7-9; Psalm 147:5). For instance, God is infinite when it comes to space and time, meaning He is not confined by \_\_\_\_\_ space nor is He restricted by time since He is \_\_\_\_\_ (Psalm 90:1-2). God's infinity also extends to His \_\_\_\_\_ of things as well as His \_\_\_\_\_ to do all things according to His will.

### ? How should we live knowing that God is infinite?

## VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"The God of the universe has spoken, we believe what he says, and we will obey. We must make a decision that we will hold in the face of all opposition and apparent contradiction. The powers of hell can never prevail against the soul that takes its stand on God and on his Word."<sup>2</sup>

–Elisabeth Elliot (1926-2015)

### POINT 3: The people rejoice because of divine sovereignty (Ezra 6:16-22).

At the completion of the temple, God's people \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ God diligently and wholeheartedly, following the Lord's commands.



**What are some commands for how we are to worship God because of our salvation in Jesus Christ?**

God is \_\_\_\_\_ and always at work rescuing His people, from Egypt, from exile, and through Christ, from \_\_\_\_\_ death and punishment.



**How should belief in God's power to rescue us bring joy to your life?**

## MY RESPONSE

Because God has forgiven our sin and dwells within us, we seek to show through our lives that God is our priority.

- **HEAD:** What are some ways you have seen God glorified through the obedience of His people?
- **HEART:** What aspect of what Jesus has done for you stands out to you that you can praise Him for today?
- **HANDS:** How will you express your worship of God, in the Spirit and because of Jesus, through serving others this week?

NOTES

### VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"Let us see to it that we keep God before our eyes, that we walk in His ways, and seek to please and glorify Him in all things great and small. Depend upon it, God's work, done in God's way, will never lack God's supplies."<sup>3</sup>

—Hudson Taylor (1832-1905)

# A PROMISE INHERITED

**+** **SESSION IN A SENTENCE:**

Everything that God has said can be trusted because it is impossible for Him to lie.

**+** **BACKGROUND PASSAGES:**

Psalm 118; Hebrews 6

**+** **SETTING:**

God had promised to bring His people back into the land of promise, restoring His dwelling place and giving His people hope and a future. But upon their return, the new temple was not as great as Solomon's, the sacrifices offered did not result in the glory of the Lord descending like it had at the dedication of the first temple, and the promises of God seemed to be left unfinished. Yet God had promised that there would be a day when He would bless the world through Abraham and His glory would be revealed to the world. God is trustworthy, and His promises can be relied upon.

# DAY 1

## READ:

Psalm 118

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

Psalm 118:8-9

## NOTES

While most people are dependent upon their cell phones, there are those who try to avoid cell and wifi signals. In 2011, the BBC reported that a number of people had moved to Green Bank, West Virginia, for the specific reason that wifi and cell phone signals are banned there. The lack of signals in this mountain town isn't due to inaccessibility but to prevent signals from interfering with a number of important radio telescopes in the area. The largest of these radio telescopes is owned by the National Radio Astronomy Observatory, which uses its technology to listen to low-level signals across the universe. Others are operated by the U.S. Military.

A small percentage of people (less than five percent of the population) suggest that they suffer from Electromagnetic Hypersensitivity (EHS). These individuals report that exposure to electromagnetic fields causes them great difficulty with their day-to-day function. While EHS is not recognized by the World Health Organization or the United States government, due to a lack of scientific evidence, those who have moved to Green Bank suggest that their conditions have dramatically improved.<sup>1</sup>

While EHS may be disputed, the reality of sin and death cannot be. Everyone is born in sin, and the payment for sin is death (Romans 6:23). The way to find refuge from sin and death is to flee to the Lord Jesus Christ, to be hidden in Him. To take refuge in Christ is to trust that He has dealt with our sin by being our atoning sacrifice and has removed the penalty and the power of sin from us (Hebrews 2:17). By His blood, He cleanses us and protects us from the wrath to come.

**Have you taken refuge in Christ? If not, will you do so today? If you have, with whom can you share this news?**

# DAY 2

## READ:

Hebrews 6

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

Hebrews 6:17

## NOTES

When someone passes away, those who are the next of kin often are acknowledged by the deceased in a will. They are given the rights to certain portions of the deceased person's estate. Because their names have been recorded as being in the familial line, they are the recipients of what has been left behind.

When, by faith, we trust in Jesus Christ, we become heirs of the promise (Hebrews 6:17). God had promised to Abraham that he would become an heir of the world (Romans 4:13). This promise was not only to Abraham, but also to his offspring. In a similar way, Jesus told His disciples that the ones who are of the kingdom of heaven are those who are humble, and they will receive the inheritance of the world (Matthew 5:5).

An inheritance isn't something that an heir wonders if he or she will get. It is a legal certainty that they can bank their future upon. The certainty of an inheritance does not depend upon any other factor than the relationship that has been established.

In the good news of Jesus Christ, we have become heirs of the promise that God made to Abraham. God has made a legal declaration, swearing by Himself that He will give all those who trust in Christ a certain and secure future with Him forever. This inheritance isn't something that is earned by any good works. Instead, it is received as a gracious gift from our Father who is in heaven, who loves to lavish us with His mercy and promises us that He will give us a home with Him forever.

**What does God's gracious gift of an inheritance teach you about His character?**

# DAY 3

## READ:

Hebrews 6:13-20

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

Hebrews 6:18

## NOTES



### ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #18: GOD IS TRUTHFUL

The Scriptures are clear that in God there is no falsehood (Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18). God represents things as they really are. Everything He says can be trusted because God guarantees the truth of everything He tells us. The call for humans to be honest and not to bear false witness is rooted in the utter truthfulness of our Creator. Telling the truth is one way we bear the image of God, whose Son is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

In C. S. Lewis’s classic work *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the two younger Pevensie children, Edmund and Lucy, are playing when they enter the wardrobe in the Professor’s house. Lucy, the youngest, claimed that the wardrobe led to a different world. When her brother Edmund followed her, he discovered that this mysterious world of Narnia was real. When the two children returned, Lucy shared with her older siblings, Peter and Susan, that Edmund had joined her in Narnia. Edmund denied it, however, saying that he was playing with Lucy and having fun.

Concerned about their youngest sister, Peter and Susan go to the Professor, the owner of the house. They express their concerns that Lucy is going mad and explain to the Professor what has happened.

“How do you know,” he asked, “that your sister’s story is not true?” His questions lead them to explain who has been more truthful to this point. “That’s the funny thing about it, sir,” said Peter. “Up until now, I would have said Lucy every time.”

At this point, the Professor’s suggestion to the two oldest Pevensie children is to consider the truthfulness of Lucy’s claims based on her character.<sup>2</sup>

While humans can be unreliable, character matters. How someone has behaved in the past will often give a clear indication as to how we should interpret their behavior in the present.

And though humans can be unreliable, God is always reliable, and He has never lied. The writer of Hebrews tells us that it is impossible for God to lie. For the God of all truth to be inconsistent with who He is would be the most massive contradiction in the universe. God’s word is truth (John 17:17), so He can be depended upon for what will come in the future.

**What are some ways that God has been true to His word in the past?**

# DAY 4

## READ:

Psalm 118

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

Psalm 118:1-4

## NOTES

“Keep Calm and Carry On.” The sign with this phrase, originating from the British government in 1939, was intended to produce resolve and encourage morale in preparation for the impending air raids during World War II. While almost 2.5 million copies of the poster were printed, few were ever publicly displayed. In 2000, a little-known copy was found, and it soon became a household decorative sign.

The British stoic thought of the Victorian age—keep a stiff upper lip and resolve in the face of trouble—sounds noble and vigilant, yet for many people, the advice is discouraging. In our anxious age with push notifications and constant social media checking, remaining calm is hard to do. Just stuffing your emotions or ignoring your feelings isn't as easy as reading a sign and staying calm.

The Bible doesn't call us to British stoicism, as though being a good Victorian-era citizen is the ideal to which we are to aim. Instead, being steadfast is a great description of what the Christian life is about. In the face of hardships and trials, Christians are to stand, keeping their feet firmly planted, and not be moved (Ephesians 6:14). The source of our steadfastness isn't due to our great resolve; it comes from the steadfastness of the Lord Himself. Over and over, Scripture speaks of the steadfast love of the Lord, of His love that endures forever (Psalm 118:1-4). We have faith to stand strong because He is faithful. We love because He first loved us (1 John 4:19).

In an anxious age, the good news that we have is that our steadfastness is due to His steadfastness. He will hold us fast. We don't just keep calm and carry on. We carry on because He holds us.

**What are some ways that the Lord has kept you in times of difficulty?**



# DAY 5

## READ:

Hebrews 6:13-20

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

Hebrews 6:19

## NOTES

## VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"A mighty fortress is our God,  
A bulwark never failing; Our  
helper He, amid the flood  
Of mortal ills prevailing: For  
still our ancient foe Doth  
seek to work us woe; His  
craft and power are great,  
And, armed with cruel hate,  
On earth is not his equal.  
Did we in our own strength  
confide, Our striving would  
be losing; Were not the right  
Man on our side, The Man of  
God's own choosing: Dost  
ask who that may be? Christ  
Jesus, it is He; Lord Sabaoth,  
His name, From age to age  
the same, And He must win  
the battle."<sup>3</sup>

—Martin Luther (1483-1546)

If you have spent any time on a boat out on a body of water, you know the danger of not paying attention to where you are and what is going on. If the motor of the boat is turned off and you are just sitting there, you will discover that over time the currents of the water and the breezes in the air will cause you to drift. Before you know it, you can find yourself in a dangerous spot where it may be too shallow or where there are rocks that can cause damage to the boat.

In the same way, the Scriptures warn us about spiritual drifting. The book of Hebrews calls us to pay close attention to the great salvation that we have received so that we do not drift away (Hebrews 2:1). Spiritual drifting often results in sinful and unbelieving hearts that will turn away from the living God and harden the heart against God and His promises (Hebrews 3:12,15).

Instead, as we consider Christ, we have an anchor for our souls (Hebrews 6:19). This anchor affixes us to the truth of God's promises and keeps us from drifting away. When waves begin to roll and the winds start to blow, this anchor keeps us from turning away from the living God. By paying close attention to this great salvation that we have received and fixing our eyes upon Jesus, the source and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2), we can weather any storm, endure any trial, and resist any temptation. Our faith is not anchored in our feelings toward Jesus, nor is our faith anchored in our good deeds. Instead, our faith is anchored in the fact that God is wholly true and He keeps His promises to be our God.

**How can you fix your eyes upon the promises of God today?**

# GROUP

NOTES

## VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"[T]o trust in man tends to make us mean, crouching, dependent; but confidence in God elevates, produces a sacred quiet of spirit, and sanctifies the soul."<sup>4</sup>

—Charles Spurgeon  
(1834-1892)

### POINT 1: God is trustworthy, demonstrating His greatness (Ps. 118:8-9; Heb. 6:13-16).

The psalmist reminds us to take \_\_\_\_\_ in the Lord because only He is fully \_\_\_\_\_.



**What are some ways God has been trustworthy with His promises?**

God promised Abraham that He would \_\_\_\_\_ him, give him a land, and \_\_\_\_\_ his people, and God fulfills that today through making a people out of those who \_\_\_\_\_ Christ.

### POINT 2: God is trustworthy, manifesting His character (Heb. 6:17-18a).

God's oath was not only to Abraham but to his \_\_\_\_\_, which includes us, as we follow Christ, because He is \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ in wanting to call us to Himself.



**Since God has committed Himself to His promises, what effect should this have on our lives?**

### ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #18: GOD IS TRUTHFUL

The Scriptures are clear that in God there is no falsehood (Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18). God represents things as they really are. Everything He says can be \_\_\_\_\_ because God guarantees the truth of everything He tells us. The call for humans to be honest and not to bear false witness is rooted in the utter truthfulness of our \_\_\_\_\_. Telling the \_\_\_\_\_ is one way we bear the \_\_\_\_\_ of God, whose Son is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).



How does God's unchanging character to keep His word give you assurance in Him?

**POINT 3: God is trustworthy, anchoring His salvation** (Heb. 6:18b-20).

NOTES

God's promise encourages us, as we flee for refuge in the Lord from sin and death, to \_\_\_\_\_ for His \_\_\_\_\_ found in Christ Jesus.



In what ways is God our refuge?

Similar to Melchizedek, Jesus is our \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ who atones for our sin and presents us before the Father as \_\_\_\_\_.



What confidence does Christ's work give you about your future?

**MY RESPONSE**

Because God is truthful and we are to follow in His ways, we are not to bear false witness and instead tell the truth at all times.

- **HEAD:** How can you be more careful about representing the truth of God in this world?
- **HEART:** What are some ways that you can delight in the truth of God's promises?
- **HANDS:** What areas of your life do you need to speak truthfully about so as to represent Christ faithfully to those around you?

**VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY**

"His oath, His covenant, His blood Support me in the whelming flood; When all around my soul gives way, He then is all my hope and stay. On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand; All other ground is sinking sand, All other ground is sinking sand."<sup>5</sup>

—Edward Mote (c. 1797-1874)

## UNIT 18

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**FOR LOOK,**

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**THE DAY**

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**IS COMING**

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# “We Have Acted Wickedly”

by Mike Brooks

Air travel with carry-on luggage is as much an art as it is a science. If done rightly, the carry-on is a strategic move that can save time and trouble. If done wrongly, well, that is another story. There is nothing quite like waiting in an airplane aisle as a weary traveler attempts to force an oversized carry-on bag into the overhead compartment. In most cases, what is immediately evident to onlookers soon becomes evident to the individual—the baggage just will not fit.

What is true in a physical sense often is true spiritually: We carry a lot of spiritual and emotional baggage, and the baggage does not fit. On account of our sin, feelings of guilt and shame can be a lot like the cumbersome carry-on item. We don't know how to deal with it. Guilt over wrongdoing has compounding effects that threaten to disorient us completely. Shame and regret, looming in the shadows of otherwise ordinary days, cripple us and cloud our judgment.

The baggage simply will not go away on its own and we are left with the question “What do we do with our guilt and shame?”

## THE ORIGINS OF GUILT AND SHAME

Though not characteristic of the original or new, forthcoming creation, feelings of guilt and shame over sin serve a purpose. Recall, in Genesis 3, Adam and Eve's response to their own disobedience. Deceived into eating the forbidden fruit by the serpent, the pair immediately covered themselves, and as the Lord entered the garden, the two ran and hid among the trees. A pattern perpetuated throughout all of human history entered the world: humans sin, sense their guilt, and respond in shame.

In Esther, Ezra, and Nehemiah, we see the effects of the sin cycle as it has been amplified over the course of several centuries. Though the people of Israel

## The gospel of grace provides a way out from beneath the weight of our guilt and shame.

had some measure of joy and freedom in the promised land, those experiences often were short-lived, and the people eventually were exiled from their land and seemingly from God's promises. These three Old Testament books offer reflections from among God's people in captivity and on their return.

Amid the threat of pernicious enemies, the Lord used Mordecai and Esther as a way of reaffirming His promises and demonstrating His faithfulness to His people, despite their inclinations to wander. Along the way, God's chosen people learned what it means to rightly acknowledge their sin before God and to trust in His goodness and saving power. Ezra and Nehemiah encountered opposition in their attempts to rebuild Jerusalem while God's people remained tempted to jettison God's righteous rule in their lives.

Though God's people often were enveloped by guilt and shame on account of their disobedience, we are reminded through each narrative of God's supernatural ability to save, redeem, and provide. Importantly, we are reminded of both the consequences of sin and God's just and gracious response to His wayward children.

### **GUILT, SHAME, AND GODLY SORROW**

Objectively speaking, all of us are guilty before God on account of our sin (Rom. 3:23), and for many, this objective sense of guilt produces a more subjective sense of shame, or perhaps embarrassment. On one hand, this response is proper. There ought to be a sense of guilt and shame that results from disobedience toward God. Sin is, after all, transgressing His righteous rule. It is spurning the very One who knows us best and loves us most.

Yet on the other hand, there are kinds of shame that do not lead toward righteousness. For instance, some may feel shame purely on account of the earthly consequences of their sin, whether that is the disappointment of others or embarrassment over the loss of reputation. These emotions stand apart from what Scripture refers to as true contrition, or "godly sorrow" (2 Cor. 7:10). Another kind of shame that does not lead toward righteousness is shame that entraps the believer. On account of offense toward God or perhaps the immense amount of suffering caused to others, believers are tempted to wallow in their shame, forgetting that there is One who has ultimately overcome sin.

## **A WAY FORWARD: PARDONED AND SET FREE**

Reckoning with sinful disobedience often leads down two interrelated paths. On one hand, we can become overwhelmed with our guilt, paralyzed by the shame that accompanies our guilt, unable to assess the entirety of our situation in light of the truth of God's Word.

On the other hand, we can recognize that the gospel of grace provides a way out from beneath the weight of our guilt and shame. Though our guilt is certain and our shame may be warranted, neither are strong enough to diminish God's faithfulness to us. Through Jesus's sinless life, death, and resurrection, God has provided the way for those who trust in Him to be freed from their guilt (Rom. 8:1). Christ's saving work covered our shame and set us free from the penalty of sin (Rom. 6:23).

What do we do, then, with our guilt and shame? We carry them to Calvary and humbly lay them at the foot of the cross. We grow in confidence that the Lord helps us and that we ultimately will not

Shame and regret,  
looming in the  
shadows of otherwise  
ordinary days,  
cripple us and cloud  
our judgment.

be disgraced (Isa. 50:7). Jesus takes our burdens and dispenses with them for us. With a proper view of God's righteousness toward sin and His willingness to pardon and save, we acknowledge the reality of our sin against Him, humbly confess it to Him, and repent (1 John 1:9; Acts 3:19). We lean into the restoration and forgiveness offered to us through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Then we live from our new God-wrought, blood-bought identity as children of God: guilty, yet pardoned; once shame-filled, now set free.



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We live from our new God-wrought, blood-bought  
identity as children of God: guilty, yet pardoned;  
once shame-filled, now set free.

# A RESCUING QUEEN

**+** **SESSION IN A SENTENCE:**

God brings salvation at just the right time in just the right way.

**+** **BACKGROUND PASSAGE:**

Esther

**+** **SETTING:**

In what is surely remembered as one of the darkest periods of Israelite history, the exile cast a pall over everything that set God's people apart: they were not in the promised land, they couldn't worship in the temple, and their distinct identity was being swallowed up in that of their captors. Worst of all, it was all their fault for turning their backs on their God. Yet He hadn't turn His back on them. The Jews were free to return, the temple had been rebuilt, and in the midst of a godless nation's rule, Yahweh was still arranging the situations and paths of His people to prove Himself faithful.



# DAY 1

## READ:

**Esther 1–2**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Esther 1:12**

## NOTES

The story of Esther begins with two people whose egos were too big to fit in the same palace.

For starters, we have the illustrious King Ahasuerus, known as Xerxes to the Greek world. His father, Darius the Great (see Ezra 4–6), had begun fighting against the Greeks, but upon his death, he left the task to his son. Early in his reign, Xerxes exerted his power and destroyed Babylon,<sup>1</sup> and at some point he threw himself a party to display his own wealth and the splendor of his greatness (Esther 1:1-4). But at the moment of highest celebration, when he invited his beautiful queen to join the party, he was insulted by her refusal to attend.

Granted, there is much debate as to why Vashti said no. Some scholars think the king may have invited her to attend wearing only her crown, which the queen found insulting. Others say she was busy with her own party for the women and found answering the king too much of an inconvenience. Ahasuerus was deeply insulted and so kicked Vashti out of her crown and made the edict for women to obey their husbands (1:9-10). Then the “Project: Rebuild the King’s Ego” began, which paved the way for Esther as queen.

As much as we might find fault with Ahasuerus or Vashti, we can see ourselves in this passage. When we’re operating at the edge of stress and at the end of our wits, we don’t see situations rationally. When we’re insulted or have our feelings hurt, we overreact. When life isn’t going as we think it should and everything seems out of control, we assert control in such a way that offends and makes the situation worse.

**How can you rely on the Bible so that you are refreshed and renewed by the Lord even in the midst of crazy days?**

# DAY 2

## READ:

**Esther 3–4**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Esther 4:15-16**

## NOTES



## ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #29:

### **GOD'S PLAN AND HUMAN ACTION**

God's sovereignty over all of life encompasses the free actions of human beings. Proverbs 19:21 says human beings have many plans, but only the plan of the Lord will stand. In ways we are unable to comprehend fully, the Lord's plan goes forward through the choices of human beings as moral agents. Even freely chosen sinful actions are factored into God's overarching plan, as is the case with the crucifixion of Jesus—an event both purposed by God through foreknowledge and yet also carried out by the wicked decisions of human beings (Acts 2:23). Knowing that God is working all things for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28), we trust in His promise to fulfill His plan, even when we do not understand our present circumstances.

In ancient times, mourning was public: sackcloth and ashes, fasting, weeping, and more. When Mordecai heard the decree written by the vile Haman—prescribing the destruction of all the Jews throughout Persia—he and the other Jews mourned. And they should have; this was completely devastating.

We're not comfortable with outward mourning in our world today, though. Many of us act more like Esther, sending better clothes and encouraging the mourner to get it back together. We avoid mourners because we don't know what to say, and when we do spend time with them, we try to keep our focus on happier times.

But sometimes we just need to mourn. Tears can be cathartic, and tears with a friend or family member truly wash over us in a wonderfully beautiful way. When my grandfather died, my family and I sat with my grandmother, helping her “hold it together” in the days following. But one of her favorite home health nurses simply walked in, hugged my grandmother around the neck, and wept aloud. We all joined her, and we were all a little closer to healing after those vocal tears.

When you struggle to mourn, the Psalms are a good place to give words to your grief. In Psalm 6, David mourned over his sin, weakness, and fear. In his mourning, he poured out his heart in tears over evil and believed that God heard his prayer. When our mourning is turned heavenward, we find a renewed confidence in God: He hears, He knows, He will act.

Esther didn't go through Mordecai's outward mourning, but she did choose to fast with her people. With fasting and praying, she wanted to hear God clearly and find strength to obey His instruction. When others are mourning, we can pray for them with the same fervor and devotion as Esther, believing God to guide them and us.

**How do you deal with grief? How can you pray passionately for someone who is mourning?**

# DAY 3

## READ:

**Esther 5–7**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Esther 5:7-8**

## NOTES

### VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"That is what our sacrifice of ourselves should be—'full of life.' Not desponding, morbid, morose; not gloomy, chilly, forbidding; not languid, indolent, inactive; but full of life, and warmth, and energy . . . filling every corner of our own souls and bodies, filling every corner of the circle in which we move, with the fresh life-blood of a warm, genial, kindly Christian heart. Doubtless this requires a sacrifice; it requires us to give up our own comfort, our own ease, our own firesides, our dear solitude, our own favorite absorbing pursuits, our shyness, our reserve, our pride, our selfishness."<sup>2</sup>

—Arthur P. Stanley (1815-1881)

There are two types of cooks: those who like to follow a recipe and those who like to wing it. Recipe-following cooks usually prepare amazing desserts, perfect turkeys, and beautiful breads. For cooks like me, who fly by the seat of our pants, we take pride in making a meal to feed our entire family out of what we already have in the pantry.

It takes both skills to walk in obedience. Sometimes we know exactly what we should do: "Go sit next to that woman." "Go buy that family some diapers." "Go hand him the trail mix you just bought." Like following a great recipe, we are led by the Lord and our job is to obey immediately, without taking time to debate with ourselves or consult others.

But there are other times when our leading from the Lord is less specific. I have a friend who, sitting under a sermon that had nothing to do with raising children, got a definite yet unspecific word from the Lord: "Foster children." She and her husband set out to seek God more fully: Were they to help a foster organization? Donate? Accept children into their home? It took time, prayer, and continual re-commitment to hear God clearly and take that next step of faith.

We see this going on in Esther's story. At her first dramatic scene in front of the king (Esther 4), when he offered her whatever she wished, she simply invited him and Haman to a banquet. At that banquet, she invited them to another one. On the surface, it might seem that Esther was leading them on a wild goose chase, yet eyes of faith can easily imagine her pleading with the Lord for guidance and instruction.

As the Lord's followers, we must be ready for either situation: immediate obedience or careful seeking. He may set one or both before you.

**When have you attempted to wait and seek God when you already knew His instruction?**

# DAY 4

## READ:

**Esther 8**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Esther 8:1-2**

## NOTES

I've heard my dad tell the following story dozens of times: "If you came home from work one day and there was a teenage boy sitting on your couch, eating your food, watching your television, you'd immediately throw him out. You don't know him, and he's not welcome. But if your teenage son brought this same boy over and said, 'Dad, this is my friend David.' You'd say, 'Come on in, David. Have some food. Have a comfy seat. Want to watch some television?'" One person's connection helps bridge the gap between two people.

We see this very thing happening in Esther 8. Mordecai had already proven his allegiance to the king in reporting an assassination attempt (Esther 2:21-23) and had been acknowledged with honor (Esther 6), yet he had not been officially introduced to the king. But after Esther's risk to save her people and reveal Haman's plot to annihilate the Jews, she connected the king with the man who had saved many, many lives. Undoubtedly, Esther explained Mordecai's insight, good judgment, and allegiance to Ahasuerus and the Jews.

As Christians, we understand that the same thing happens in helping introduce others to Jesus. An unbelieving person can read all about Him, but the truth of who He is may never enter his or her heart and mind. However, if you or I befriend that person and they see that He is truly our Savior and Lord, it's much like bringing a friend over to meet family. The connection helps bridge the gap from unbeliever to child of God.

**In what ways do you feel a personal relationship with Jesus? How are you communicating and demonstrating that relationship to others?**

# DAY 5

## READ:

**Esther 9–10**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Esther 9:16-17**

## NOTES

We are called to fight, but we don't fight as the world does.

Haman's edict was the result of the lack of respect he felt from Mordecai, one man who would not bow to him. Instead of letting it go or forgiving the Jewish man in Susa, he instead chose to eradicate Mordecai's entire people scattered into clusters all over what we know today as the Middle East. The bloodshed of an entire people group over the slight of one person seems to be irrational, but sadly, this is the kind of fighting we see in our world today.

Many people find justification in fighting over slights, a differing view, or a lack of respect. Generational and inter-family hatred grows over years, eventually to the point that no one even knows why the conflict began or how it escalated to such rage. One comment on social media can ruin friendships and long-standing respect between people.

This should not reflect us. We are called to fight the good fight of the faith, making a good confession in the presence of many witnesses (1 Timothy 6:12). The Jews did this very thing in the story of Esther. Though Haman's edict gave permission to kill and plunder the Jews (Esther 3:13), the Jews did not retaliate similarly: they fought and they defended themselves, but they did not take any plunder (Esther 9:10,15,16). Their fighting was not so that they would prosper but so that they would survive.

The good fight of the faith involves choosing to live and fight while maintaining righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness (1 Timothy 6:11). We choose to hold our tongue, forgive, and pray for our enemies.

**Where are you fighting like the world when you should be fighting the good fight?**

# GROUP

NOTES

## VOICES from THE CHURCH

“Queen Esther demonstrated that being faithful to God involved being faithful to His people. Thus, faithful to the meaning of her name, she became a shining ‘star’ for her people in a time of darkness.”<sup>3</sup>

—Janice Meier

**POINT 1: God’s salvation comes through a timely risk** (Esth. 4:13-17).

Sometimes we are called to take a \_\_\_\_\_ that challenges our \_\_\_\_\_ and our expected life path.



**How had Esther’s life plan reflected a careful placing by God “for such a time as this”?**

### ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #29: GOD PLAN AND HUMAN ACTION

God’s sovereignty over all of life encompasses the \_\_\_\_\_ actions of human beings. Proverbs 19:21 says human beings have many plans, but only the plan of the Lord will stand. In ways we are unable to comprehend fully, the Lord’s plan goes forward through the choices of human beings as moral agents. Even freely chosen sinful actions are factored into God’s overarching plan, as is the case with the crucifixion of Jesus—an event both purposed by God through foreknowledge and yet also carried out by the wicked decisions of human beings (Acts 2:23). Knowing that God is working all things for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28), we trust in His promise to \_\_\_\_\_ His plan, even when we do not \_\_\_\_\_ our present circumstances.

**POINT 2: God’s salvation comes through a timely intercession** (Esth. 8:1-8).

God puts people in positions of \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ so that they might intercede on behalf of others in need.



**How did Esther and Mordecai use their knowledge and authority for God’s purposes?**

Esther had \_\_\_\_\_ with the king and used it to \_\_\_\_\_ for her people.

### POINT 3: God's salvation comes through a timely victory (Esth. 9:1-2).

NOTES

We can find \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_ in God's plan and perfect timing.



What are some things in your life that happened "in the nick of time?" Looking back, how can you see God's perfect timing in that exact moment?

God fights \_\_\_\_\_ us, and often He will call us to \_\_\_\_\_ as well.



How should our fighting look different from how the rest of the world fights?

## MY RESPONSE

Because Christ interceded on our behalf, we recognize that God has placed us where we are at this time to share the gospel with others so they might be saved, even if it comes at great risk to us.

- **HEAD:** Where might God be calling you to take a risk in His name today?
- **HEART:** What fears holding you back from walking in confident obedience to the Lord will you confess to Him today?
- **HANDS:** What aspects of your life will you use to help others and glorify God in this season?

## VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"Insistence on security is incompatible with the way of the cross. What daring adventures the incarnation and the atonement were! What a breach of convention and decorum that Almighty God should renounce his privileges in order to take human flesh and bear human sin! Jesus had no security except in his Father. So to follow Jesus is always to accept at least a measure of uncertainty, danger and rejection for his sake."<sup>4</sup>

—John Stott (1921-2011)

# AN INTERCEDING CUPBEARER

**+** **SESSION IN A SENTENCE:**

God empowers His people to fulfill the mission He gives to them.

**+** **BACKGROUND PASSAGE:**

Nehemiah 1–7

**+** **SETTING:**

The books of Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther all contain stories of God's people in exile. After generations neglected God and His instructions, the Lord did exactly what He said He would do, replace the blessings of His covenant with curses through exile in Babylon. But after the Persian Empire took control, the possibility of going home became a reality. Yet the heroes of the exile found themselves in a state of flux: Could they be forgiven of their sin? Was God still with them? In each of these books, God's answer is clear: yes. The Lord's covenant was as faithful as ever because God's faithful love endures forever.



# DAY 1

## READ:

**Nehemiah 1:1-4**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Nehemiah 1:2-4**

## NOTES

Each generation has its own “Where were you when” questions: Where were you when you heard JFK had been shot? Where were you when you heard Elvis died? When you watched the Challenger fall from the sky? When you heard about the Columbine shooting? When you heard about the Twin Towers falling? These events froze us in time. Reality seemed to take a back seat as we considered, “What in the world is happening, and how will we ever move on from this?”

Beyond that, most families have their own similar collective memories—some good, some horrible. Remember when we took that extended-family camping trip? Remember when little Katie was born? Remember Grandma Liddle’s funeral? What about when we had to auction her house? Like the generational events, we walk through these events with our family and friends, clinging to one another for hope and support.

Nehemiah found himself at the next level when he was overwhelmed with news from home. Though the report—Jerusalem was in great trouble and disgrace with its walls broken down and gates burned—came from one he called a “brother,” it may have been a kinsman or simply another Jew. And he doesn’t appear to have stuck around or to have been part of Nehemiah’s mourning and praying. Nehemiah took this news hard, and he took it in solitude.

Maybe you can relate. There are some tragedies that are difficult to carry to our extended family. Unfaithfulness in marriage, drug abuse, deep-seated sin, bankruptcy, and other catastrophes leave us not only reeling but feeling alone.

But that’s never the case with God. In our weeping, our fasting, our mourning, and beyond, we have a God who always sees us, hears us, and provides comfort we can’t imagine. When we reach out in our prayers, He is ready to receive us in His loving arms.

**In what situations do you feel all alone? How have you spent time with the Father for comfort?**

# DAY 2

## READ:

**Nehemiah 1:5-11**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Nehemiah 1:5-11**

## NOTES



### ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #31: PRAYER AND PROVIDENCE

If God is in control and already knows the future, why pray? The Bible teaches that although God has a plan for this world that He promises to fulfill, prayer is often the means God uses to accomplish His divine purpose. Even though God knows the end result, the means that lead to that end result will be accomplished through prayer. In this sense, it is true that “prayer changes things,” and it is also true that God uses prayer to change our hearts so that our will comes into conformity with His.

Any home chef knows the benefit of a good grocery list. As you go about your cooking for the week, you constantly add to it so that you don't find yourself without a staple item or an integral part for a meal you plan to prepare. As you walk in the store, you can find confidence in knowing you'll walk out with what you need for the days to come.

Many of us treat our prayer time with God much like a grocery list. As we go through our day, we mentally record the things that make us uncomfortable, unhappy, and unfulfilled. And when we approach the Lord in prayer, we recite those things, letting Him know exactly what it would take to fix each item and the time frame in which we'd like it done. Then we wonder why our prayer lives feel empty and hollow.

Nehemiah's prayer in these verses opens a window into what our prayers should look like, and a grocery list is the opposite of what we bring to God. First, we acknowledge Him. Nehemiah described the Lord as the God of the heavens, great, and One who keeps His covenant (v. 5). As we look clearly into His face through His true identity, the next words out of our mouth should be that of humility and confession. We don't barge into God's presence or make demands; we acknowledge Him and bow. Next, we call upon the promises He has already made and ask God to remember them (v. 8). Using the Bible and our own story with God allows us to reflect on who He has already proven Himself to be.

Once our hearts, minds, and souls are in the right place, we make our requests. God listens to that prayer and answers according to His will!

**In what ways does your prayer time sound more like a grocery list, and how might you change that?**

# DAY 3

## READ:

**Nehemiah 2:1-10**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Nehemiah 2:1-2**

## NOTES

A few years ago on a Friday afternoon, I hurt my back. Badly. I thought that jumping on the trampoline with my kids at age 38 was no big deal; my back muscles vehemently disagreed. But I had many Sunday morning responsibilities at church, so as I hobbled (literally) around my house on Saturday, I was confident I'd be able to teach Sunday School and play in the worship band as I always did.

I struggled to get up the stairs to my Sunday School class, and I most certainly winced a few times during class when I coughed and shifted in my seat. And as I left for the sanctuary, I found myself taking the shortest path so that I could save myself a few agonizing steps. Sitting and playing during worship was torture, but I hit most of the notes and shuffled out, thinking I'd fooled everyone.

Walking down the hall, my good friend Pat saw me. She and I had worked together over the years in several ministry opportunities, and she wasn't fooled by my act. Incredulously, she put her hand gently on my shoulder and asked, "What in the world is the matter?" No one else had noticed. No one else had seen. It was such a relief when she called my bluff, and I felt myself crumble into her warm hug. I didn't need to stay tough any longer.

Nehemiah had a similar experience with the king. Though there were certainly separate layers of authority and servanthood between Artaxerxes and Nehemiah, we see also that there was a closeness. The king noticed that Nehemiah wasn't sick but had heart sadness (v. 2). God used this insight to open the lines of communication and allow Nehemiah to take the next step in His plan of restoring His city.

**Who do you see clearly? How are you blessing their lives with your insight and care?**

# DAY 4

## READ:

**Nehemiah 2:11-20**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Nehemiah 2:18**

## NOTES

## VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

“O how good a conscience should he keep, that would never seek after transitory joy, nor ever entangle himself with the things of this world! O how great peace and quietness should he possess, that would cut off all anxiety, and think only upon divine things, and such as are profitable for his soul, and would place all his confidence in God.”<sup>1</sup>

—Thomas a Kempis  
(c. 1380-1471)

I grew up as a child of parents who were heavily active in church, and now I’m heavily active in church myself. There’s a saying that I’ve heard my whole church life, and I used to think it was funny: “Be careful what you pray for; you just might get it.” It was usually followed up with a story about praying for patience and getting a terrible boss or praying for a wayward child, only for him to end up back at home as an adult. Somehow we think we get to pray for what we want and that God’s answer will always be pleasant.

But Nehemiah’s story proves the opposite. Nehemiah lived a privileged life and had every benefit he could want as the cupbearer to the king. When he heard the news that Jerusalem was unprotected and disgraced, he likely thought, “Oh, Lord, someone needs to help them.” Obviously, that “somebody” was Nehemiah, and the task was immense.

But after Nehemiah had made the journey, rested three days, inspected the wall, and returned to present his plan to the Jews, he told them God’s gracious hand was on him (v. 18). Gracious. Would you use that word if your boss gave you an extra responsibility or your in-laws dropped by unannounced yet again? Do you see God’s hand in the sleepless nights or the long days?

God’s actions in our lives are for our good and His glory. Very few people in the Bible are commended for living safe, uneventful, predictable lives. Instead, we remember those who hear the call, see the risk, and still step out in faith. Yes, even those challenging times are the gracious hand of God in your life.

**When have you complained about a turn in your life?  
Looking back, how can you see God’s gracious hand?**

# DAY 5

## READ:

**Nehemiah 3**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Nehemiah 3:1-5**

## NOTES

There's a temptation to only glance at passages that don't seem to be of utmost importance, such as today's reading. Surely that wasn't meant for us to really consider, right? But if it weren't important to the Lord's overarching story, His Spirit would not have led the chronicler to include it in this biblical book. So we, as children of the Lord and seekers of His face, are wise to consider each passage as an integral part to God's narrative.

Nehemiah had rallied the Jews to begin rebuilding the wall, and this passage recounts who was working where. We first see that the high priest Eliashib and his fellow priests were rebuilding the Sheep Gate, while the nobles of the Tekoites didn't lift a finger to help the supervisors over the Fish Gate. On the surface, we see the comparison: some worked and some didn't.

But this isn't a passage about laziness; instead, it seems to point more to calling. When we feel that a particular job or task is given to us as busy work or simply to fill a need that no one else cares about, we're unmotivated. But if we see our job as a direct calling from God, for the fulfillment of His purposes, our work ethic and commitment level are changed.

This also isn't a passage about the comparison between a high priest and noblemen; either can be lazy and either can be a hard-worker. The same is true for our churches today. Recently, I watched a minister from my own church, down on his hands and knees, scraping bird poop off the sidewalk. And I've heard men and women, part of my church for decades, declare, "It's someone else's turn" to take a position of servanthood. We're all called to work with the understanding that we are called by God to do His work in our churches and communities.

**Are you a hard worker at work? At home? At church?  
Where is God calling you to serve today?**

# GROUP

NOTES

## VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY


"Let our prayer be that God may advance His work, not for our glory—not for our sake—but for the sake of His beloved Son whom He hath sent."<sup>2</sup>

—D. L. Moody (1837-1899)


**POINT 1: Success in the Lord's mission is based on His lasting promises** (Neh. 1:8-11).

### ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #31: PRAYER AND PROVIDENCE

If God is in control and already knows the future, why pray? The Bible teaches that although God has a plan for this world that He promises to fulfill, prayer is often the \_\_\_\_\_ God uses to accomplish His divine \_\_\_\_\_. Even though God knows the end result, the means that lead to that end result will be accomplished through prayer. In this sense, it is true that "prayer changes things," and it is also true that God uses prayer to change our \_\_\_\_\_ so that our will comes into \_\_\_\_\_ with His.


 **How might this doctrine change the way you view prayer?**

Knowing God's \_\_\_\_\_ and promises, we rely on Him to give us \_\_\_\_\_ in His \_\_\_\_\_, no matter the circumstances.

 **What parallels do you see between Nehemiah's situation and Esther's situation?**

**POINT 2: Success in the Lord's mission is based on His abundant provision** (Neh. 2:1-10).

Nehemiah understood the significant \_\_\_\_\_ of his task, but God provided the \_\_\_\_\_ opportunity to present it to the king.

 **How has God miraculously opened the door to a conversation or situation in your own life?**

God proved Himself \_\_\_\_\_ to Nehemiah by providing an abundance of \_\_\_\_\_ so that he could carry out his calling.

NOTES

**POINT 3: Success in the Lord's mission is based on His unstoppable power** (Neh. 2:15-20).

Nehemiah \_\_\_\_\_ obeyed the Lord's instructions. His \_\_\_\_\_ and story led others to rebuild the wall.



**What are some tasks God may call us to for which we might feel incapable?**

In the face of \_\_\_\_\_, we find our holy \_\_\_\_\_ in God alone.



**What are some Scriptures that might help us when we find ourselves facing opposition?**

## MY RESPONSE

Because we are protected and secure in Christ, we join with others to complete the kingdom work God has given us.

- **HEAD:** What are you doing to build up the walls of your faith? Where do your walls need repair?
- **HEART:** What can you confess to God right now if you feel disconnected from God's plan for your life or if you are hesitant to follow even if you do know?
- **HANDS:** What story of God's faithfulness in your life will you share with someone this week?

## VOICES from THE CHURCH

"To work well in service to God also means to work as His people—as valued individuals and as a unified body of believers . . . Once we have put our faith in [Jesus], this is our eternal identity: we become part of God's called-out people."<sup>3</sup>

—Kathleen Nielson

# A PROCLAIMING PRIEST

**+** **SESSION IN A SENTENCE:**

When God's people hear the Word of the Lord, they find joy and seek to obey God's commands.

**+** **BACKGROUND PASSAGES:**

Ezra 7–10; Nehemiah 8

**+** **SETTING:**

With Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem, the former cupbearer turned governor of the region began to rebuild their city and their identity (Neh. 5:14). As with most big projects, they had their share of troubles, both inside and out. Enemies threatened, and opportunists took advantage, but through it all, Nehemiah's one-sentence prayers sustained him and his people as they slowly but surely rebuilt the wall (5:19; 6:9). Then came the even larger challenge: Who would this people be? Would they be those who despised their God and their people or would they be the people the Lord had called them to be in His Word?



# DAY 1

## READ:

Ezra 7

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

Ezra 7:1-10

## NOTES

There is great joy in knowing someone well.

Understanding a person's hopes, dislikes, loves, passions, and background helps us to be a better friend, spouse, parent, and human. In getting to know God's people from generations long ago, we have the benefit of getting to know them better as well.

This week's focal passage is Nehemiah 8, but one of the main characters in that narrative, Ezra, is described in detail in Ezra 7. So before we dig into his role in this week's lesson, let's get to know him a little better.

**His background:** Ezra was a descendant of Aaron, the brother of Moses and the first high priest. Like a doctor whose father was a doctor, as was his father before him, Ezra surely had heard the stories of generations from his family line serving the Lord through their priesthood. And though the destruction of the temple and the exile had undone that role, Ezra still made it his identity to know the Word.

**His skill:** Ezra was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses (Ezra 7:6). One never gets skilled in something unless he practices, so we can be certain Ezra had spent many hours not only copying and learning the law but also observing it.

**His blessing:** Ezra had received favor from the Persian king because God's hand was on him (Ezra 7:6). As Ezra chose to walk in obedience to God's Word, God poured out His blessings on the faithful scribe.

**His journey:** The trip from Babylon to Jerusalem was no Sunday drive; it took four months. Travel at that time was nowhere near easy, and choosing to leave all he had ever known of home to return to the land of his ancestors proved his faith.

**What aspects of Ezra's life and discipline can you glean and apply to your own (see especially Ezra 7:10)?**

# DAY 2

## READ:

**Nehemiah 8**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Nehemiah 8:1-3**

## NOTES

Sometimes we just need to be together.

I come from a tight extended family. My seven cousins and I are all within eight years of age, and we grew up together as best friends. We genuinely love seeing each other, and as we've grown older, we've also grown closer, cherishing both our past and present stories as a group.

So when our favorite uncle died unexpectedly in the spring of 2020, just as government-mandated shutdowns and pandemic protocols were spreading like wildfire, we felt so far apart. We got the news on group text. We cried together over our phones. We knew we were trying to keep from spreading harmful germs to people we loved most, but our hearts were crying out, "I need to hug her neck! I need to wipe those tears!"

Isolation kills us from the inside out; gathering together helps us to heal, inspire, encourage, and share. When my family finally got together for the first time after my uncle's death, it felt like a breath of fresh air even as we mourned together. I felt healing in seeing tears in my cousins' eyes, knowing we shared the common bond of feeling, hoping, and weeping over our loss.

This is the exact environment that the Jews had created for themselves in Nehemiah 8: everyone together. This wasn't a gathering for the scholars or the men or the teachers; it was for everyone who could understand what they heard (v. 2). We can accurately envision multiple generations from multiple families all gathered together to hear the Word of the Lord. They didn't send the little kids off to Sunday School or out to play or have the women go cook; this was everyone together. We might call that community at its best.

**How do you include your family in multi-generational worship, gatherings, and service?**

# DAY 3

## READ:

**Nehemiah 8:1-6**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Nehemiah 8:4-6**

## NOTES



### ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #5: AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

Since the Bible is the inspired Word from God, God's special revelation to humanity, the Bible is the ultimate standard of authority for the Christian. Because it is truthful in everything that it teaches, Scripture is humanity's source for wisdom, instructing us on how to live life well to the glory of God. Submitting to the authority of Scripture means that we are to believe and obey God by believing and obeying His Word.

We know that God blesses us: He sends rain and sun, winter and summer, good days and bad, times of work and times of healing. We have experienced the blessings of the Lord and, if we have eyes to see, understand that they are everlasting and indescribably overflowing.

But sometimes we don't realize that we can bless God too. It seems like an odd concept—How can we, who are infinitely less powerful and understanding, bless our almighty God? The idea of blessing God includes not only kneeling but also praising or greeting. Abraham's servant blessed the Lord when he found Rebekah as a wife for Isaac (Genesis 24:48). David blessed the Lord as he and the people had donated items for the temple to be built (1 Chronicles 29:10), as did Hezekiah as he and his people rededicated their lives to following the Lord and again collected offerings for the temple (2 Chronicles 31:8).

We bless the Lord when we acknowledge that He has blessed us. Blessing God flows from a faith that recognizes God as the source of every good thing. When we give Him credit for painting a beautiful sunset, for keeping us from danger, for helping us have a good belly laugh, or for the chance to eat a delicious meal, we bless God.

It is no surprise, then, that Ezra opened his worship service and time of community reading by blessing the Lord, "the great God" (v. 6). With hands raised and knees bowed, the community of faith joined in elevating God in their hearts. That picture is a reflection of what blessing the Lord does to our hearts and minds: we lift Him up as we humble ourselves. In pointing to His grace, mercy, and abundant faithfulness, we bless His name with our attitudes, our spirits, and our lives.

**What can you do today to bless the Lord as Ezra and the Israelites did?**

# DAY 4

## READ:

**Nehemiah 8:7-12**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Nehemiah 8:9-12**

## NOTES

It is easy to fall into a pit of despair. Sometimes we're overwhelmed with the fears and horrors of our world, fully aware of injustices, catastrophes, and dangers. Sometimes it's not even the big things that cause us to despair but the daily things: the grind of work, the raising of children, the planning for the future. And sometimes those concerns are compounded by our own inadequacies, our own failures, and our own sin.

If you've ever despaired, it's pretty easy to imagine the mind-set of the Jews gathered in Nehemiah 8. They had been born into a nation that had been exiled for its idolatry and disobedience to God. They had been brave enough to return to Jerusalem in an attempt to rebuild the city, only to find opposition and confrontation for all their efforts.

And when they finally finished the wall and felt like they could breathe, choosing to hear the Word of the Lord for the first time in who knows how long, they realized just how far they had fallen from obedience. We can hear their thoughts: "Will we ever get this right? We're not even close to living as God prescribed!" Just like we would likely do, they mourned.

But Ezra and Nehemiah saw their hearts: These people were seeking God, choosing to hear, and wanting to obey. So instead of heaping guilt upon them, they gave them different instructions: go have a party, eat rich foods, drink sweet drinks, and share with others for today is holy to the Lord (v. 10).

Don't let despair of the world, the daily grind, or your own shortcomings drag you down. Take time to enjoy God's blessings—celebrate His Word and His faithfulness.

**How can you and your family celebrate God this week?**

## VOICES from THE CHURCH

"Understanding the words of God was the gateway to understanding God himself, leading to delight."<sup>1</sup>

—Augustine Pagolu

# DAY 5

## READ:

**Nehemiah 8:13-18**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Nehemiah 8:13-18**

## NOTES

I come from a camping family. Every summer of my young life, we would pack up my grandmother's camper with sheets, cooking gear, and half our refrigerator of food, ready to spend a week at our favorite state park. We'd ride bikes, hike, build fires, and play cards. The camper was old and dry-rotting, but it kept the rain off and provided us with a quarter-thickness bed at night. We loved every minute of it.

As a young newlywed, my husband and I picked up the camping banner and started taking canoe/camping trips with friends. Instead of a camper, we'd grab a tent and some sleeping bags, packing freeze-dried meals and a tarp to put up in case it rained. A few years later, we took our first "big" camping trip with friends, hitting several national parks in the southwest. Packing gear and food for six adults took many conversations and spreadsheets, but we all made it home with memories to last for years.

Each camping trip presents its own challenges, particularly when rain, cold, wind, or bugs make everyone miserable. But the isolated struggle draws us back to a simpler time; the daily concerns of "normal" life fall away, and the comfort of a hot bowl of oatmeal over a campfire seems like a luxury. We dream about the future while talking in the tent at night, laughing at the adventures of the day and excited for the next one tomorrow.

Stepping away from modern comforts and intentionally choosing to live in tents might seem like a nightmare to some, but I bet the ancient Jews would agree with me: it's a great change of pace. And for those who celebrated the Festival of Booths for the first time in generations, we can only imagine the similar excitement to step away from normal life, recall the faithfulness of their God, and hope for the future.

**What would it look like for you to step away from normal life and take time to reflect and dream with the Lord?**

# GROUP

NOTES

## VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"We need to repent of the haughty way in which we sometimes stand in judgment upon Scripture and must learn to sit humbly under its judgment instead. If we come to Scripture with our minds made up, expecting to hear from it only an echo of our own thoughts and never the thunderclap of God's, then indeed he will not speak to us and we shall only be confirmed in our own prejudices."<sup>2</sup>

—John Stott (1921-2011)

**POINT 1: God's people gather to hear the Word of the Lord** (Neh. 8:1-8).

### ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #5: AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

Since the Bible is the \_\_\_\_\_ Word from God, God's special revelation to humanity, the Bible is the ultimate standard of authority for the Christian. Because it is \_\_\_\_\_ in everything that it teaches, Scripture is humanity's source for wisdom, instructing us on how to live life well to the glory of God. Submitting to the authority of Scripture means that we are to \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ God by believing and obeying His Word.



**What are some ways we submit to the authority of God's Word?**

Those who \_\_\_\_\_ the Word of the Lord are \_\_\_\_\_ and worship God.

**POINT 2: God's people display the joy of the Lord** (Neh. 8:9-12).

As we read and understand God's Word, it will bring us to \_\_\_\_\_ and confession, but even in this, we should still \_\_\_\_\_ the Lord.



**Why should conviction of sin result in our joy?**

God's presence and \_\_\_\_\_, when understood from His \_\_\_\_\_, remind us to celebrate Him with others who share in these same gifts.



**How can we live so that our joy as believers in Christ can be seen by others for the glory of God?**

### POINT 3: God's people unite to obey the commands of the Lord (Neh. 8:13-18).

When God's leaders take the responsibility to know and \_\_\_\_\_ His Word, the entire community is \_\_\_\_\_ .

Obeying God may require repentance, celebration, stepping out of our \_\_\_\_\_ comfort zone, putting our lives at risk, or hard work, but we know that obeying God requires \_\_\_\_\_ His Word, and obeying will lead to \_\_\_\_\_ .



**What are some reasons we might fail to recognize the privilege we have to read and hear God's Word?**

## MY RESPONSE

Because we have received salvation through Jesus, the Word of God, we seek to worship Him in all we do as a way to proclaim His glory to the nations.

- **HEAD:** What impact does God's Word have in your life? How do you know?
- **HEART:** What attitudes toward Scripture do you need to confess so you can prioritize God's Word for the health of your soul and your church?
- **HANDS:** Who in your life needs to hear the Word of God this week? How will you share it with them?

NOTES

### VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"It is a holy day of the Lord for us when we take pains to hear and carry out His words."<sup>3</sup>

—Bede (c. 673-735)

# A CONFESSING COMMUNITY

**+** **SESSION IN A SENTENCE:**

We are to confess our sin so that we might be restored with God.

**+** **BACKGROUND PASSAGE:**

Nehemiah 9–10

**+** **SETTING:**

In Nehemiah 8, we saw that God's people had begun to weep as they heard the words of the law, obviously realizing the gravity of their sins. But Ezra interrupted their time of consideration of sin because it was actually a time of festivity: time to celebrate God! And because God's Word is supreme, they obeyed. But when the festival was over and the booths had been put away, the tug of conviction was still strong. The people still needed to repent of their sin, and they did through a prayer recounting the mighty and gracious works of the Lord in contrast to the sinful works of His people, both past and present.



# DAY 1

## READ:

**Nehemiah 9**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Nehemiah 9:1-2**

## NOTES

I've always lived in a small town in the south, and though it's not politically correct to make sweeping statements about a group of people, I will say this is a general truth: we small-town southerners love football. On Friday nights, the whole town heads to the local high school, ready to cheer on the team, whether or not you actually know anyone playing. Then on Saturdays, those with college ties or bequeathed season tickets gear up and head to their favorite team's weekly game, usually arriving hours before kickoff to tailgate, which is more of a celebration before the game just in case the result isn't good at the end.

It's easy to spot who's on your team at a tailgate: Who is wearing the gear that goes with your team? Gear might include a simple jersey or jacket, or the intense fan may have also added face paint and perhaps some colored hair. Either way, I can identify your team from a mile away because of what you've done on the outside to reflect the team you support with all your heart.

Similarly, the Jews revealed what was in their hearts through what they did in the opening lines of Nehemiah 9 with their fasting, wearing sackcloth, and putting dust on their heads. This wasn't one person or one family; it was something they had all chosen to do. On top of that, they all stood, listened to the Word, and confessed their sins and worshiped. When we feel passionately about something, we allow our visible, outward expressions to reveal our hearts.

It's a blessing to worship with other worshipers, to confess with other confessors, and to give thanks with others who are thankful. I am blessed when my congregation and my brothers and sisters in Christ let their hearts overflow into a visible expression of their faith.

**How can others see your heart for God and your choice to worship Him?**

# DAY 2

## READ:

**Nehemiah 9:5-8**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Nehemiah 9:6**

## NOTES

A year ago, against my better judgment, our family got a puppy. And though I expected the blessings of his cuteness and excitement and love, I've received another blessing from an unexpected place: I've begun spending more time in the earliest and latest moments of the day walking this puppy and enjoying God's creation. I can tell my heart is soft and receptive to the Lord when His creation leads me to worship. The opposite is also true; when I'm distracted and unfocused because of the busyness of my daily life, I miss all the beauty of nature and God's fingerprints in it.

It's a holy time for me, honestly. That puppy wakes up with the sun and begins whimpering for me to take him out just as I slide out of bed. And though I'd rather enjoy a cup of coffee before our early-morning walk, I slide on shoes and put him on his leash. It's silent and peaceful, and in those moments, I am able to see more clearly than at any other point in the day. I consider the beauty of each blade of grass, outlined in the frosty morning. I hear squirrels chittering, acorns crashing to the ground, and footsteps of invisible creatures scurrying into the underbrush. I see rays of sunlight highlighting one small circle of my yard, and I take a moment to consider the colors and smells of that spot.

Then at night, one last time before I go to bed, I walk the puppy again in holy solitude. This time, the darkness creates an entirely different setting: I see the glowing eyes of miniscule spiders in the grass and see the pinpoints of light in the sky. And like the Levites and worshipers in Nehemiah 9:6, my heart swells as I consider God's creativity and attention to detail.

**How often do you intentionally spend personal worship time outside in God's creation? How does that soften your heart?**

## VOICES from THE CHURCH

"Our response to the awesome revelation of God's character should be to hate sin with complete hatred, with every fiber of our being, and to petition God to commit it to total destruction ... Search me. Try me. Expose me. Lead me. Awe begets humility, confession, and submission."<sup>1</sup>

—Jen Wilkin

# DAY 3

## READ:

**Nehemiah 9:9-15**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Nehemiah 9:9-15**

## NOTES

If you've ever been to an animal shelter and visited the dogs, you've seen their desire to be seen and touched. They jump on the doors, bark, wag, drool, and do anything they can think of to catch your eye. We humans feel so much superior to our canine friends, but deep down we also want to be seen, heard, touched, and loved.

The Levites sang that God saw the oppression of their ancestors in Egypt (Nehemiah 9:9). Through COVID and before and after, one of the major struggles people face is isolation and the sense of feeling alone, unseen, and forgotten.

There are several people in Scripture who felt forgotten, but one comes to mind first: Hagar. An Egyptian slave of Abram and Sarai, she had been impregnated (perhaps against her will) and mistreated for the contempt she had shown to her mistress. She ran away—pregnant, unwanted, and all alone. When the angel of the Lord came to her in the wilderness, revealing that God Himself knew exactly who she was and where she was, she acknowledged that God sees her (Genesis 16).

But God didn't just see Hagar; He stepped into her life and took action. God didn't just see the Israelites when they were enslaved in Egypt; He stepped in and took action. And when the Jews took time to reflect on His actions on their behalf, they praised Him. Even though the Israelites walking away from Egypt saw God's intervention as heavy-handed and demanding, their descendants saw that He is full of mercy and compassion.

God sees you, and God acts on your behalf as well. If it doesn't seem like it right now, take time to think back on His seeing and acting five, ten, or twenty years ago. Praise Him for the blessing of looking back at His faithfulness.

**How might your own story read in psalm form, similar to Nehemiah 9:9-15?**

# DAY 4

## READ:

**Nehemiah 9:16-31**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Nehemiah 9:16-31**

## NOTES



## ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #67: REPENTANCE

Repentance is a response to God's gracious call to salvation. It includes a genuine sorrow for one's sin (Luke 5:1-11), a turning away from one's sin toward Christ (Acts 26:15-20), and a life that reflects lasting change and transformation (Psalm 119:57-60). It is the human counterpart to God's work of regeneration; in other words, the human side of our conversion.

In these verses, the word "abandon" or "forsake" appears four times: Verses 17,19,31 point out that God did not abandon or forsake His people. Verse 28 does say that God abandoned them to their enemies, but when they cried out to God, He heard and rescued them.

Over and over, God's people acted as though they weren't rescued. Over and over, they disobeyed and chose to worship idols and feed their own selfishness. Over and over, God led them, provided for them, helped them, and heard them.

We had a dog that probably felt abandoned one time. Kip was a great dog, loving and loved. When we went on vacation one year, we left a familiar neighbor in charge of coming to take care of him. She called one day and said, "Kip hasn't eaten his food from yesterday, or the day before." We knew something had gone wrong. Kip had walked out of our yard and journeyed down a big hill and across a wide creek, seeking human companionship. He found it in the form of a kind family with a young girl.

But as soon as we got home from our vacation, we started looking. We searched the road and the internet, finally finding him on a local lost pet website. We were thrilled to drive to the house and call his name. We always wondered if Kip thought we abandoned him. That wasn't the case, but it may have seemed it at the time. And we had worried ourselves sick to find him.

God, likewise, may abandon us to our sinful hearts and idolatry, but He waits to run back to us when we cry out to Him. The bond between us and God is never severed, and even when we turn our backs on Him, He is still providing, still helping, and still leading.

**Do you feel abandoned by God? Can you look back and trace where you might have strayed from His guidance and authority?**

# DAY 5

## READ:

**Nehemiah 9:32–10:39**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Nehemiah 9:36-37**

## NOTES

Ecclesiastes 3:12-13 expresses the idea that rejoicing and enjoying eating, drinking, and the fruits of our work is a gift from God. The daily blessings of getting to eat, drink, and enjoy our work with freedom is sometimes taken for granted. When these are taken away from us, we feel that harsh reality.

We feel these sentiments in Nehemiah 9:32-37.

The people had confessed their sins and looked clearly at the sin of their ancestors. They saw their own wickedness in the light of God's faithfulness, realizing they hadn't listened to His law, commands, or warnings. And now, as a result of that habitual generational sin, they lived as slaves without complete freedom.

Generations before, the Assyrians had conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel, then the Babylonians conquered Judah and Jerusalem. They, in turn, were overthrown by the Medo-Persians. And though these new Persian rulers had allowed the Jews to return home, God's people still answered to a crown that was not of their people. Though the king allowed them to return to the land, they were still under a foreign leader and paid high taxes for it. They were still slaves in that sense.

We feel the gut-wrenching pain in verses 36-37 as they expressed how they lived as slaves, realizing it was because of their sin. These returned exiles would have given anything to eat and drink and enjoy their efforts with freedom, but instead, they were in "great distress."

**What are you taking for granted in your normal life that others would cherish? What gifts of life will you praise the Lord for, seeing them as a blessing?**

# GROUP

NOTES

## VOICES from THE CHURCH

“He will always be I AM WHO I AM, which means He won’t necessarily be who we want Him to be. God exists within Himself. We have zero ability to define Him or shove Him into a box of our choosing . . . When you approach God on the basis of who He says He is, you’re ready to see Him as I AM WHO I AM—[Yahweh], the Relational God. And you don’t want to miss [Yahweh]. He offers a relationship that’s both powerful and deeply personal.”<sup>2</sup>

—Tony Evans

### **POINT 1: Confession begins with a proper view of God** (Neh. 9:5-8).

As they began their confession, the Levites led the people into an act of \_\_\_\_\_ that began with a focused and accurate \_\_\_\_\_ at God Almighty.

**?** **Who has God shown Himself to be thus far in our study of the storyline of the Bible?**

As God’s people looked back at God’s \_\_\_\_\_ in their lives and in their family story, they saw that He is \_\_\_\_\_ faithful.

**?** **Looking back at your own life, in the good and the bad, what are some reasons you can say, “God is faithful”?**

### **POINT 2: Confession acknowledges the reality of sin** (Neh. 9:16-21).

The Lord had rescued His people from slavery, provided for them, and blessed them with His guidance and law, but they \_\_\_\_\_ the Lord as God in favor of their own sin, and this is the \_\_\_\_\_ of all sin— \_\_\_\_\_ from God.

**?** **How should we view our sin in light of the character and actions of God?**

As we acknowledge and confess our sin against the \_\_\_\_\_ God, we must take time to remember God’s unfailing love, \_\_\_\_\_, and mercy.

### POINT 3: Confession humbly seeks pardon and restoration (Neh. 9:32-35).

Confession requires a humble \_\_\_\_\_ on our part that we have sinned and \_\_\_\_\_ God's righteous discipline and judgment.



**How do humbling circumstances serve the purpose of bringing God's people to confession of sin?**

### ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #67: REPENTANCE

Repentance is a response to God's gracious call to salvation. It includes a genuine \_\_\_\_\_ for one's sin (Luke 5:1-11), a \_\_\_\_\_ away from one's sin toward Christ (Acts 26:15-20), and a life that reflects lasting change and transformation (Psalm 119:57-60). It is the human counterpart to God's work of regeneration; in other words, the human side of our \_\_\_\_\_ .

### MY RESPONSE

Because all sin is a reproach to God and harms us and others, we confess our sin on a regular basis, knowing and trusting that we are completely forgiven in Christ.

- **HEAD:** How are you getting to know God better through your study of God's Word?
- **HEART:** What sins do you need to confess to the Lord, knowing there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus?
- **HANDS:** How will you help others find the freedom to confess their sins and be healed? How will you find others to hear your own confessions regarding sin and temptation?

NOTES

### VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"In return for the love which brought the Son of Man down from heaven, in return for the love which led Him to die for us on the Cross, we cannot give Him holy lives, for our lives are not holy; we cannot give Him pure souls, for our souls are not pure; but this one thing we can give, and this is what He asks, hearts that shall never cease from this day forward, till we reach the grave, to strive to be more like Him; to come nearer to Him; to root out from within us the sin that keeps us from Him. To such a battle, brethren, I call you in His name."<sup>3</sup>

—Frederick Temple (1821-1902)

# A BURDENED PEOPLE

**+** **SESSION IN A SENTENCE:**

All humans are guilty because of sin, but those who feel the shame of their sin and repent will receive the Lord's compassion.

**+** **BACKGROUND PASSAGES:**

Malachi; James 2

**+** **SETTING:**

Ezra and Nehemiah both led groups of exiled Jews back to Jerusalem, recognizing God's hand in putting them under Persian rulers who didn't mind their return to their homeland and worship of their God. But just because God's hand was leading didn't mean the people had turned back to the Lord completely. Just like Moses dealt with the sins of the Israelites who had accompanied him out of slavery in Egypt, so Ezra and Nehemiah dealt with sin even in the midst of rebuilding the temple and the walls. Had they fallen so far away from God that they didn't even feel their guilt?



# DAY 1

## READ:

**James 2**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**James 2:10-11**

## NOTES



### **ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #45: GUILT AND SHAME**

Guilt refers to the objective status of someone being found guilty for a wrong committed as well as the incurring of punishment that comes with it (Matthew 5:21-22; James 2:10). Shame is the emotional pain that comes from sinful actions. Scripture teaches that human beings are guilty in an objective sense and also feel the weight of shame in a subjective sense.

James 2 begins with the topic of favoritism, reminding those in the church not to show favoritism towards those who are rich over those who are poor. James realized the church was sometimes guilty of doing this and reminded his readers that sometimes it's the little sins, the subtle ones, that can wreak havoc in our souls. It's the sins of how we treat each other, how we may not show love or grace or forgiveness to others, that will end up leading us down a wrong path.

James's words in today's focal passage are a reflection of the Old Testament teaching about the law: it's all or nothing. God didn't give His commands with cafeteria-style expectations. So in considering the Ten Commandments, when we think, "I've got 'Do not murder' and 'Do not make an idol,' with no problems," James reminds us that "Do not covet" and "Honor your father and mother" are still there.

This is frustrating on the surface because it makes us think: "Good grief! Who, then, could manage it?" Which points us to the truth—no one. God knew no human could ever follow the law, but He wanted us to realize our need for His mercy and to cast ourselves upon Him for salvation.

God didn't give the law so that we would become good humans; He gave it to show just how very pitiful we are and how badly we need a Savior since we can't be justified and saved on our own strength (see Romans 3:19-24). But that truth doesn't negate His standards. We should still strive to obey, strive to honor Him, and strive to walk holy. But with every stumbling step, we also testify to God's grace, mercy, and power to save.

**How can James 2:10-11 lead you to begin today with a prayer of confession and repentance?**

# DAY 2

## READ:

Malachi 3:1-6

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

Malachi 3:6

## NOTES

Solomon reflected, “There is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9). That’s a great quote that I’ve heard applied to many things: wayward teenagers, crabgrass, family struggles, and conflicts in church. It actually reflects the Bible and the history of humankind: we’re pretty rotten, selfish creatures who do our best to push away our holy, almighty God.

But here’s where the “nothing new under the sun” quote is even more accurate: God does not change (Malachi 3:6). Though God’s people were living differently because the world around them changed, they assumed God had changed as well. He hasn’t and He never will.

It’s not just that God Himself is unchanging; everything about Him is unchanging, as well: His words (Numbers 23:19, Isaiah 40:8), His counsel (Psalm 33:11), the character of His purpose (Hebrews 6:17), and His standing as the only God (Psalm 90:2). And just when we want to complain that God is unchanging, as though that were a negative thing, we need to remember that it’s because He is unchanging that we are not destroyed.

That’s exactly what the Lord said to His people in Malachi 3:6—because He has not changed, the Israelites had not been destroyed or consumed. He always has been and always will be compassionate, merciful, and full of unfailing love. He doesn’t blow His top or lose His cool.

According to the book of Malachi, and most of the prophets, we praise God for His unchanging character because that’s the opposite of us. We are wishy-washy: obedient today, rebellious tomorrow. God’s people showed great faith one day and turned around to worship idols another—just like we do today. There’s nothing new under the sun.

**Voice a prayer of praise to the Lord, acknowledging Him for being unchanging and why that’s wonderful.**

# DAY 3

## READ:

**Malachi 3:7-12**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Malachi 3:7**

## NOTES

If reading this passage for the first time, it might seem God was deflecting the question He was being asked. In verse 7, He invited the Jews, “Return to me, and I will return to you.” The Jews, in their typical-for-the-book-of-Malachi, snide-comment-type of question, asked, “How can we return?” God almost seemed to ignore this and changed the conversation into one about robbing Him.

But upon looking at this passage more slowly and more reflectively, you may find that this line of questioning is not avoiding the topic but instead revealing it. God had already invited His people to return to Him over and over, with clear instructions (see Isaiah 44:22; Jeremiah 4:1; 24:7). God’s invitation to return always involves obedience and a humble heart.

So when the people ask how to return to God, He first lets them know how they left Him: in disobedience. God had made it quite clear what was expected of them in the sacrifices (see Leviticus 1:3-9), and through blatant disregard these expectations (see Malachi 1:6-14), they were robbing God and turning away. Disobedience is the same as leaving God.

Which is why the offer stands: “Return to me, and I will return to you.” This was an open offer for the Jews centuries ago, and it is still open for believers who have chosen disobedience: Return. Come back. Walk that path of obedience. If it seems like too much, throw the cares of the burden upon Jesus, who walks beside us and helps bear the burden (Matthew 11:28-30). Love God, love others as yourself (Matthew 22:36-40), and return to God.

**Where have you wandered from God? To what obedience is He calling you today?**

# DAY 4

## READ:

**Malachi 3:13-18**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Malachi 3:16-18**

## NOTES

Throughout the history of God's people, there has always been those who feared God and those who didn't, those who followed in His ways and those who tried to go their own path, those who were obedient to God's Word and those who were disobedient.

In Malachi 3:13-15, God expressed that the people had been harsh in their words, and it almost seemed like there was no remnant of righteous people left in God's chosen nation. But then Malachi 3:16 shows us that there is always a remnant, "those who feared the LORD." There will always be two types of people: those who speak harsh words against the Lord, choosing to turn their backs on Him and believing that committing wickedness leads to prosperity, and those who fear the Lord, speaking faith to one another, whose names are written in a book of remembrance before the Lord.

There will always be a remnant because God promised Abraham that his descendants would multiply and through them the nations would be blessed (Genesis 22:17-18). There will always be people who are truly following the Lord and His ways (Matthew 7:13).

In Malachi, we see that there can be two very different situations occurring concurrently: both rebellion and faith at the same time, both obedience and harsh words at the same time. Even within the same body of believers, two situations can exist at one time. And God was not overwhelmed; He didn't miss a thing. He heard every harsh word of the rebels as He cherished every faithful word of those who feared Him.

This gives us hope that God will always be for His people and He will always fulfill His promises and accomplish His mission to grow His family and kingdom.

**Do you feel overwhelmed at this time with the wickedness of the world or the apathy of some church-goers? Pour out your heart to the Lord, who is in control and knows His true followers.**

## VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"The remarkable thing about fearing God is that when you fear God you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God you fear everything else."<sup>1</sup>

—Oswald Chambers  
(1874-1917)

# DAY 5

## READ:

**Psalm 103**

## FOCAL PASSAGE:

**Psalm 103:8**

## NOTES

God has compassion on us. He knows we are like His first human creation, Adam, made of dust (Psalm 103:14). And even when we are grown up and strong and paying our own bills and feeling like we just might conquer our corner of the world, He knows we're still human, helpless and dependent upon Him for our next meal, our next step, and our next breath.

As humans, we fall short. We fail. We try to do things our own way. Like a child who thinks she knows better than her parent, we are disobedient, wanting immediate gratification.

But this is not new to God. He knows who we are. From birth to death, He sees all our goodness and all our wickedness.

In that Fatherly knowledge, the Lord is compassionate and slow to anger. He's faithful in His love for us. He knows we're just a bigger, smarter version of the tiny child we were who entered the world many years earlier, still made of dust, still desperately in need of everything He gives us, especially His grace and forgiveness and love. That's the compassion of God.

He saw our first day, and He sees our last. He loves us, each and every breath. Even knowing we fall into wicked ways, He provided a way for us to escape judgment, punishment, and death. He is always for us for we are His children. And so, He will do anything and everything in His power to save and rescue us, even sending His only Son to die for us. That is compassion, that is grace, and that is faithful love.

**When was the last time you thanked God for His compassion and love? Do so now.**

# GROUP

NOTES

## VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

“You little think how much the life of all your graces, and the happiness of your souls doth depend upon your ready and cordial obedience to the Spirit. When the Spirit urgeth thee to secret prayer, and thou refuseth obedience; when he forbids thee thy known transgressions, and yet thou wilt go on; when he telleth thee which is the way, and which not, and thou wilt not regard; no wonder if heaven and thy soul be strange. If thou wilt not follow the Spirit while it would draw thee to Christ, and to thy duty; how should it lead thee to heaven, and bring thy heart into the presence of God?”<sup>2</sup>

—Richard Baxter (1615-1691)

**POINT 1: The sins of the wicked incur their guilt** (Mal. 3:7-12; Jas. 2:10-11).

### ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #45: GUILT AND SHAME

Guilt refers to the objective status of someone being found guilty for a \_\_\_\_\_ committed as well as the incurring of \_\_\_\_\_ that comes with it (Matthew 5:21-22; James 2:10). Shame is the \_\_\_\_\_ pain that comes from sinful actions. Scripture teaches that human beings are guilty in an objective sense and also feel the weight of shame in a subjective sense.



**How does God use guilt and shame to draw us back to Himself?**

We all fall short and are \_\_\_\_\_ of breaking God’s law, whether in big or small ways. Therefore, we are deserving of God’s \_\_\_\_\_ .

**POINT 2: The boasting of the wicked reveals their shamelessness** (Mal. 3:13-15).

Harsh words against God, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ , reveal our \_\_\_\_\_ of faith and respect for the Lord.



**What are some examples of harsh words we might be guilty of speaking against the Lord?**

When we complain, we \_\_\_\_\_ the wickedness in our heart. Our lack of \_\_\_\_\_ at complaining against God points to a lack of faith.

**POINT 3: The fear of the Lord among the righteous prompts His compassion**  
(Mal. 3:16-18).

Even when God's people seem faithless, there will always be a group who \_\_\_\_\_ Him. God \_\_\_\_\_ them and \_\_\_\_\_ them.



**What are some ways we should speak to one another as those who fear the Lord?**

Those who fear the Lord find \_\_\_\_\_ in His promises, experience His \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_ with righteousness.



**Seeing how spiritual disciplines helped the Israelites in this volume to act with righteousness, how can these disciplines help us to fear and serve the Lord?**

## MY RESPONSE

Because all of our sin is forgiven in Christ, we seek to move from the shame we feel when we sin to delighting in our full acceptance in Christ Jesus.

- **HEAD:** How do you normally handle shame? Through what you've learned today, what should you do?
- **HEART:** What struggles to agree with God's authority and commands in your life will you confess to Him today?
- **HANDS:** What people do you know who seem burdened by their sin? How will you use this week's Scriptures to pray for them and speak to them about salvation through faith in Jesus Christ?

NOTES

## VOICES from THE CHURCH

"Let's return to our Creator, our author. We were made for him and by him, and we're called to live in relationship with him. You and I will never thrive merely as who we are; we must know and live from the truth of whose we are."<sup>3</sup>

—Jen Oshman

# FOOD FOR THE SOUL

by Daniel Davis

If you are a parent, perhaps you know the frustration of a child who won't eat her dinner. She just stares at it, plays with it, complains about it, and resists it with every fiber of her being, all while you chow down on a perfectly good and tasty meal, or at least one in which you've invested some time.

Or perhaps you know the child who won't drink from a sippy cup when you are trying to transition out of the bottle stage. Again with the staring, the crying, the pursed lips, and the sideways shifting head. For all our machinations, bargaining, threatening, or shaming, you can lead a child to the cup, but you can't make him drink.

## FEED THE BODY

Why are these scenarios so frustrating in the life of a parent? Beyond the sinful nature of our own hearts to take offense where we shouldn't, I believe we struggle in these moments because we know that, barring allergies, the plate of food and the cup of milk are necessary for our children to grow. The body needs nourishment; without it, we languish, deteriorate, and die.

The advice most give to such struggling parents is patience—a child won't starve himself to death. Eventually, the growling of an empty belly will overpower the stubborn will of a resistant child. They will eat; they will drink—it just may take some time.

## FEED THE SOUL

So according to common wisdom, a child won't starve himself or herself to death physically. But it sure seems we human beings of all ages can intend to starve ourselves spiritually.

Hebrews 5:11-14 says:

We have a great deal to say about this, and it is difficult to explain, since you have become too lazy to understand. Although by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the basic principles of God's revelation again. You need milk, not solid food. Now everyone who lives on milk is inexperienced with the message about righteousness, because he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature—for those whose senses have been trained to distinguish between good and evil.



If we do not partake  
of the food of  
the Word of God—  
whether milk or  
meat—we will gain  
no nourishment,  
we will languish,  
deteriorate, and die.

The message, God's revelation—God's Word—is nourishment for our souls. As we begin the life of faith, we need the milk, basic teachings about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, sin, the gospel, salvation, and the church. We need to know that God created everything, that we are rebellious sinners deserving death and hell, that Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again to give us eternal life, and that one day He will return for His followers and make everything right in the world.

But as we grow in the faith, we expect to transition to solid food—to deeper studies of Scripture, doctrine, the Trinity, obedience, and evangelism. To be clear, this doesn't mean we leave the basics behind; rather, we go deeper into them. But if we do not partake of the food of the Word of God—whether milk or meat—we will gain no nourishment, we will languish, we will deteriorate, and we will die.

## FEAST UPON THE WORD OF GOD

How stubborn we can be to ignore an empty soul begging to be fed even scraps of God's Word. In places around the world where the Bible is being translated for the first time, believers will devour the scant pages inscribed with the blessing of God's inspired revelation. From their lack of access to God's Word, they know firsthand the joy of poring over His words and feeding themselves.

So instead of apathy, instead of resisting, "taste and see that the LORD is good" (Psalm 34:8). God's Word is "sweeter than honey dripping from a honeycomb" (Psalm 19:10). Scripture teaches, trains, fills, and satisfies. So here's the point—we will not grow without feasting on the Word of God. "Man must not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). And if you believe that, then open your mouth and take a bite.

# REFERENCES

## UNIT 16

### Session 1

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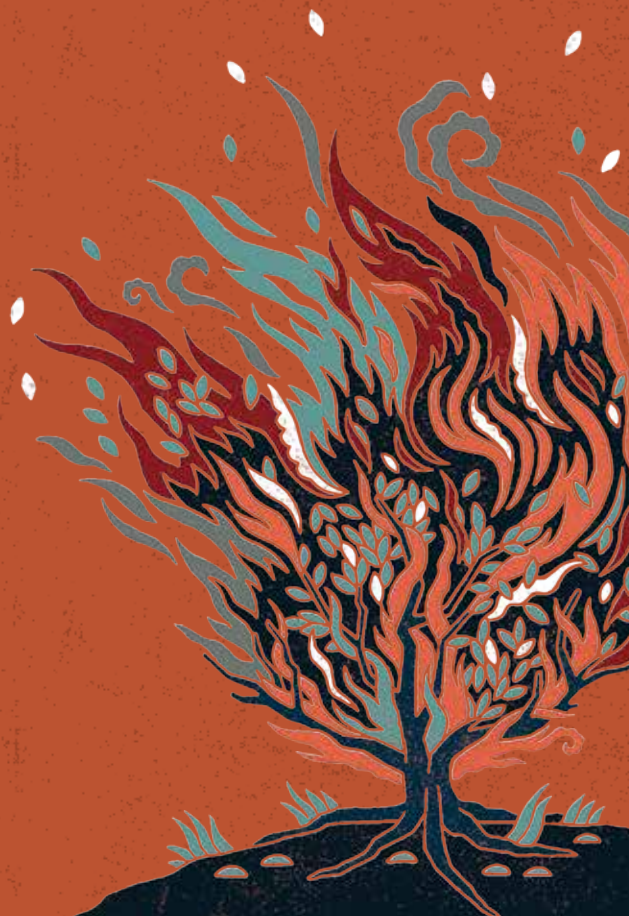
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