



the **GOSPEL**PROJECT.

FROM CAPTIVITY TO RESTORATION

ADULTS / LEADER GUIDE / WINTER 2022-23 / VOL. 6 / CSB

**Find it on the app
by scanning the
QR code here or
looking under the
Serve tab.**



Growing together in Christ



dutch cove
missionary baptist church

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 (Gen. 12:1-3). It would be through this people—the descendants of Abraham—that One would come to crush the head of the serpent (Gen. 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

The Editor	4
The Writers	5

SUGGESTED FOR
THE WEEK OF

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

Introduction	6
Dec. 4 Session 1 God's Promise to His People (Jeremiah 29–30)	8
Dec. 11 Session 2 God's Reward for the Faithful (Daniel 1)	20
Dec. 18 Session 3 God's Judgment of the Proud (Daniel 5)	32
Dec. 25 Session 4 God's Presence in All Places (Doctrine: God Is Omnipresent) ...	44

UNIT 17: TAKE REFUGE IN THE LORD

Introduction	54
Jan. 1 Session 1 A People Returned (Ezra 1–2)	56
Jan. 8 Session 2 A People Cleansed (Zechariah 13–14)	68
Jan. 15 Session 3 A Temple Restored (Ezra 2–6)	80
Jan. 22 Session 4 A Promise Inherited (Doctrine: God Is Truthful)	92

UNIT 18: FOR LOOK, THE DAY IS COMING

Introduction	102
Jan. 29 Session 1 A Rescuing Queen (Esther)	104
Feb. 5 Session 2 An Interceding Cupbearer (Nehemiah 1–7)	116
Feb. 12 Session 3 A Proclaiming Priest (Ezra 7–10; Nehemiah 8)	128
Feb. 19 Session 4 A Confessing Community (Nehemiah 9–10)	140
Feb. 26 Session 5 A Burdened People (Doctrine: Guilt and Shame)	152

Scope and Sequence	162
--------------------------	-----

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.

Daniel Davis

Team Leader

The Gospel Project for Adults

The Gospel Project®

Adult Leader Guide CSB
Volume 11, Number 2 Winter 2022-23

Ed Stetzer and Trevin Wax
Founding Editors

Daniel Davis
Team Leader

Y Bonesteele
Content Editor

Dwayne McCrary
Manager, Adult Ongoing Bible Studies

Brian Daniel
Director, Adult Ministry

Ken Braddy
Director of Sunday School

Send questions/comments to:

Team Leader by email to
daniel.davis@lifeway.com or mail to
Team Leader, The Gospel Project:
Adult Leader Guide, 200 Powell Place,
Suite 100, Brentwood, TN 37027-7514;
or make comments on the web
at lifeway.com.

Printed in the United States
of America

The Gospel Project®:
Adult Leader Guide CSB
(ISSN ; Item) is published
quarterly by Lifeway Christian
Resources, 200 Powell Place, Suite
100, Brentwood, TN 37027-7514,
Ben Mandrell, President. © 2022
Lifeway Christian Resources.

For ordering or inquiries,
visit lifeway.com, or write
Lifeway Resources Customer
Service, 200 Powell Place,
Suite 100, Brentwood, TN
37027-7514. For bulk shipments
mailed quarterly to one address,
email orderentry@lifeway.com,
fax 615.251.5933, or write to the
above address.

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).

All Scripture quotations are taken
from the Christian Standard Bible®,
Copyright 2017 by Holman Bible
Publishers. Used by permission.

THE WRITERS

Mike Brooks (Unit 18 Introduction) serves as Associate Pastor at Hope Fellowship Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He is currently in the dissertation phase of a PhD program at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Mike and his wife, Paige, reside in Cambridge.

Andrea Burke (Unit 16 Introduction) lives outside of Rochester, New York, with her husband, Jedediah, and their two kids. She homeschools, writes, and works as the Director of Women's Ministry at Grace Road Church. She also hosts the Good Enough podcast and contributes to For the Church, Fathom Mag, and Risen Motherhood. Find more at andreagburke.com or on Instagram: @andreagburke.

Andrew Hall (Unit 17, Sessions 1-4) is the Lead Pastor of Community Bible Church, located in Ilderton, Ontario, Canada. He is a graduate from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He and his wife, Melanie, have four children.

Shaq Hardy (Unit 16, Sessions 1-4) and his wife, Racheal, live in Asheville, North Carolina, where they are committed to faithfully serving the high school students of Biltmore Church. He is currently a student at Southeastern Seminary and is passionate about being a part of life-change, whether through sharing a sermon or through intentional life-on-life discipleship.

Leslie Hudson (Unit 18, Sessions 1-5) loves her mornings of silence, coffee, and Jesus—not in that order. She lives with her husband and kids in White Bluff, Tennessee, where they raise blueberries, figs, and bees. She loves to spend her free time reading, writing, journaling, and helping others know and follow Jesus.

James Jackson (Unit 17 Introduction) serves as Lead Pastor at Glynwood Baptist Church in Prattville, Alabama. He is also a popular camp pastor for Lifeway's Centri-Kid camps for 3-6 graders. James blogs at jamesjackson.blog, where he posts daily insights based on a chronological Bible reading plan. He and his wife, Trish, have two grown sons and one grandchild.



THE LORD KEEPS

HIS EYE ON

THOSE WHO FEAR HIM

“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?

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

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, 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.

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 OUTLINE

1. The day of the Lord will bring freedom (Jer. 30:8-11).
2. The day of the Lord will bring healing (Jer. 30:12-17).
3. The day of the Lord will bring restoration (Jer. 30:18-22).

Background Passage: Jeremiah 29–30

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

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

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

Jeremiah reminded God's people of His promise that one day He would restore them from their captivity. All people are captives in an even greater way. Sin has affected all of creation and nothing is as it should be. In His first coming, Jesus provided salvation for all who trust in Him. Jesus will return one day to make all things right.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

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.

GROUP TIME

NOTES



INTRODUCTION

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.

DISCUSS: Through our study of the storyline of the Bible thus far, what are some incidents you can recall when Israel disobeyed God's commands in the Old Testament? (trying to save manna for the morning [Ex. 16:20]; the golden calf [Ex. 32]; refusing to enter the promised land the first time [Num. 14]; the entire book of Judges)

TRANSITION: You can't blame God for disciplining His children as a loving father would because sin deserves punishment. Yet even in the discipline and punishment, God remains loving and faithful, patient and compassionate toward His people. As the prophet Jeremiah spoke words of encouragement to God's people in exile, he spoke of a "day of the Lord" that pointed to their immediate freedom from exile as well as a future date when God will judge between those who are righteous and those who aren't.

OPTIONAL QUESTION: How have you experienced discipline for your sin, and what was the result? (be prepared to share an answer of your own to jump-start the conversation)



Listen to session-by-session training every week on Ministry Grid, Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or Lifeway's Digital Pass: ministrygrid.com/gospelproject | gospelproject.com/leader-training.

POINT 1

THE DAY OF THE LORD WILL BRING FREEDOM (JER. 30:8-11).

NOTES

8 On that day—this is the declaration of the LORD of Armies—I will break his yoke from your neck and tear off your chains, and strangers will never again enslave him. **9** They will serve the LORD their God and David their king, whom I will raise up for them. **10** As for you, my servant Jacob, do not be afraid—this is the LORD’s declaration—and do not be discouraged, Israel, for without fail I will save you out of a distant place, your descendants, from the land of their captivity! Jacob will return and have calm and quiet with no one to frighten him. **11** For I will be with you—this is the LORD’s declaration—to save you! I will bring destruction on all the nations where I have scattered you; however, I will not bring destruction on you. I will discipline you justly, and I will by no means leave you unpunished.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Jeremiah 30:8-11** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 8-10** commentary to explain how the Babylonian captivity and God’s promise of freedom point to the future glorification of God’s people (*the bold words fill in blanks in the Daily Discipleship Guide [DDG]*):

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 (Phil. 1:9-11; Col. 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 (Phil. 3:20-21; 1 Cor. 13:12).

DISCUSS: How should the doctrine of glorification affect the way we live now? (it should cause us to look forward to that day, even in the midst of pain; cause us to pursue holiness in order that we may be ready for that day; cause us to be thankful, praising God for that day in anticipation)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 11** commentary to emphasize the following idea (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

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

TRANSITION: God’s desire in disciplining His people is not a desire to bring His people to destruction. It’s a desire to heal that which sin has decisively broken, humanity’s relationship with God.

COMMENTARY

VERSES 8-10 / In Jeremiah 29, God told Israel to settle in the land of Babylon as exiles because of their sin. Though terrifying, there was still hope. God had warned the Israelites that this would happen if they worshiped and served the gods of the nations in the land of Canaan. In fact, Jeremiah 29–30 was the fulfillment of God’s promise in Deuteronomy 4:25-31, which was the promise both to remove the people from the land for their disobedience and to remember His covenant with them. This exile from the promise land would last for seventy years (Jer. 29:10), enough time for the disobedient generation to be no more, ushering in the next generation to enjoy rest in the land once again (29:11-14).

In Jeremiah 30:8, God promised that He would free His people, Israel and Judah, breaking the **“yoke”** and tearing the **“chains”** of their captivity. We will see this promise echoed all throughout this session. For Judah, the promise of freedom would be fulfilled in seventy years time, yet the fulfillment of God’s promise to all His exiled people is a picture of the freedom to come when He one day sets the world free from sin’s captivity once and for all.

We can already see and will continue to see how this story points to the final stage of our salvation, namely, glorification. One day—only God knows when (Matt. 24:36)—Jesus will return to restore all things to Himself, breaking the yoke and tearing the chains of sin, death, guilt, and shame. In so doing, our salvation will be complete as we are restored and glorified to the moral, spiritual, and physical perfection that we were made to live in. God’s faithfulness to His people to bring them back into the promise land after their exile would prove to be but an incomplete picture of what Christ will one day do with finality.

Verse 9 shows us that though God’s promise of freedom for Judah was specific to their captivity in Babylon, it was also eschatological in nature, meaning that God’s promise of freedom for Israel foreshadowed the

ultimate freedom that Christ’s life, death, burial, and resurrection would one day win for all who repent and believe in Him. God promised to send a **“king”** through the line of David whose throne would be established by God forever (2 Sam. 7). God alluded to that promise here, essentially reminding the exiles of His faithfulness to them.

In light of that faithfulness, the people of Israel and Judah in exile had nothing to fear. Though faithlessness had gotten them into their undesirable situation, they also had no reason to be dismayed. Why? Because the Lord’s discipline was for their good and the good of the generations to follow. In fact, God’s future salvation of the nation was as sure as the present discipline the nation was experiencing. One day, all of God’s people will enjoy rest and peace in the land of promise.

VERSE 11 / God said, **“I will be with you . . . to save you!”** This declaration rang out from the mouth of the prophet as encouragement for the people. Yes, they were experiencing negative consequences at the hand of God because of their sin, but God had not abandoned them. Truth be told, God was giving the people what they had asked for back in Jeremiah 17:15, where the people, negatively influenced by the surrounding nations, asked for the word of the Lord to come against them. Here, God was both fulfilling their request and His promises. But He would one day destroy the surrounding nations while also preserving His people. Yet He also promised justice, not to **“leave [His people] unpunished.”** This is yet another promise that would be fulfilled through their captivity but also was eschatological in nature. God is a just God, which means He can’t allow sin to go unpunished. But His justice and faithfulness run together. Israel would receive punishment for their sin, but one day, through Israel, God would send His Son, Jesus Christ, who would receive in Himself the punishment the world deserves for sin in order to bring about the ultimate salvation that all of creation yearns for.

POINT 2

THE DAY OF THE LORD WILL BRING HEALING

(JER. 30:12-17).

12 For this is what the LORD says: Your injury is incurable; your wound most severe. **13** You have no defender for your case. There is no remedy for your sores, and no healing for you. **14** All your lovers have forgotten you; they no longer look for you, for I have struck you as an enemy would, with the discipline of someone cruel, because of your enormous guilt and your innumerable sins. **15** Why do you cry out about your injury? Your pain has no cure! I have done these things to you because of your enormous guilt and your innumerable sins. **16** Nevertheless, all who devoured you will be devoured, and all your adversaries—all of them—will go off into exile. Those who plunder you will be plundered, and all who raid you will be raided. **17** But I will bring you health and will heal you of your wounds—this is the LORD’s declaration—for they call you Outcast, Zion whom no one cares about.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Jeremiah 30:12-17** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 12-15** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

The problem with Israel’s **sin** wasn’t just what they did but also whom they did it against, a **holy** and just God. Thus, without God, they were **incurable**.

DISCUSS: How does sin affect a person’s relationship with God? (sin can’t destroy a believer’s relationship with God, but it causes us to be out of fellowship and feel distant from God; for believers, sin invites the discipline of God, which may seem cruel but actually reveals God’s love for His children; for nonbelievers, sin causes separation from God that cannot be cured apart from Him)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 16-17** commentary to emphasize the following idea (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

God’s promised **salvation** and healing from Babylonian captivity points to the ultimate salvation and healing God provides through **Jesus**.

DISCUSS: Why might we find it difficult to rest in God’s promise of healing? (because we might not even think that we’re sick or sinful or in need of healing; because we look to other things that may be bandages but can’t fully heal; because we think our sin, guilt, or pain might be too big for God to heal)

TRANSITION: There’s nothing wrong with doing good things, yet we can’t work hard enough to fix our sin problem. But God, through His Son, Jesus, has done everything necessary to save us from our sin.

NOTES

ZION

A synonym for the city of Jerusalem or the land and people of Israel. A hill in Jerusalem is called Mount Zion, and its name has been used to represent Jerusalem itself, and thus, the land and people of Israel.

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.”¹

—Francis Schaeffer (1912-1984)

COMMENTARY

VERSES 12-15 / The Israelites were God’s chosen people. At this point in their history, they had story after story of the Lord working mighty miracles on behalf of both Israel and Judah. So to hear God say, through the prophet Jeremiah, that their **“injury is incurable”** and their discipline **“severe”** had to be quite startling. Now, God had already declared that He was going to save them, but this was a picture of just how bad their situation was. There was no help, no prophet, priest, judge, or king, coming to their aid this time. God told them that they would be in exile for seventy years (29:10), and they had no expectation of time off for good behavior.

God was very slow to anger in giving the Israelites what He had warned to give them if they disobeyed His voice and worshiped other gods in the land of promise. Joshua reminded them of this promise right before he died, telling the people that God would remove them from the land if they disobeyed His voice (Josh. 23:16). But they didn’t listen, even though they received countless warnings from God.

The problem with Israel’s sin, though, was not just what they did but also, and primarily, whom they did it against. Their sin was done against a holy, righteous, just, and eternal God. Therefore, their sin deserved a holy, righteous, just, and eternal punishment. And now they were reaping all that their sin had earned for them. There was **“no remedy for [their] sores”** and **“no healing”** to be found at the sound of their distress.

The Israelites didn’t just worship false gods in the land of Canaan; they also entered into partnerships with the inhabitants of the land—an action strictly prohibited by God (Ex. 34:10-16). Their earthly **“lovers”** and allies, like Assyria and Egypt, had turned their backs on them.² Babylon was a powerful nation that most other nations would avoid if given the chance. So the people’s allies gave up their relationship with Judah in an act of self-preservation.

Israel cried out to God because of the pain they felt in siege and exile. But God’s answer to them, once again, was that their cry was heard but their pain was incurable. Their guilt was great and their sin flagrant and intentional. They had ignored the voice of God, and now they were imploring the same God to save them. But in the end, God would act graciously.

VERSES 16-17 / Having declared the people’s pain from their punishment to be incurable, God then said He was going to remain faithful to them despite what was happening around them. They were being devoured by their enemies, but their enemies in turn would be devoured at the hand of God. They had been exiled at the hands of their enemies, and soon their enemies would **“go off into exile”** by the hand of God. They had been plundered by their enemies, but their enemies would **“be plundered”** by the hand of God. A mighty blow had been dealt to them by their enemies at God’s command, but God would pay their enemies back for their own sin in the process.

Though their wound, which was inflicted on them by God, was incurable, God still promised to restore them to **“health.”** Israel was called an outcast because of her exile. It had been said of them that no one cares for them. But God one day will show all of her enemies that He fights for His people.

In the same way that Israel’s sin had caused them an incurable hurt, our sin is a stain that we ourselves can’t clean. Romans 8:20 tells us that God subjected the world we live in to the brokenness that we sinful human beings perpetrate every day. But just like God promised to heal the exiles, He has healed us of the brokenness that we experience because of sin. Jesus died at the hand of God and was raised by the same in order to bring salvation to the world. Israel’s plight in the midst of their captivity was meant to point to a greater salvation than the one God promised would happen in seventy years—a salvation in Christ with the death of sin and the grave forever.

POINT 3

THE DAY OF THE LORD WILL BRING RESTORATION (JER. 30:18-22).

NOTES

18 This is what the LORD says: I will certainly restore the fortunes of Jacob's tents and show compassion on his dwellings. Every city will be rebuilt on its mound; every citadel will stand on its proper site.

19 Thanksgiving will come out of them, a sound of rejoicing. I will multiply them, and they will not decrease; I will honor them, and they will not be insignificant. **20** His children will be as in past days; his congregation will be established in my presence. I will punish all his oppressors. **21** Jacob's leader will be one of them; his ruler will issue from him. I will invite him to me, and he will approach me, for who would otherwise risk his life to approach me? This is the LORD's declaration. **22** You will be my people, and I will be your God.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Jeremiah 30:18-22** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 18-20** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

God's **restoration** of His people from captivity, bringing **rejoicing** and thriving, foreshadows Jesus's restoration of all things to **Himself**.

DISCUSS: How have you seen God's restoration in your life and in the lives of those around you? (salvation from sin and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit; someone healed of sickness or cancer; financial health restored; adoption; a failing marriage restored; a wayward child coming home)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 21-22** commentary to emphasize the following idea (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Jesus is the ultimate **king** and priest, restoring our **relationship** with God that we may be called His people and He our God for **eternity**.

TRANSITION: We need something far greater than just a fix for our sin; we need the presence of Jesus in our lives. His desire is for us to have a relationship with Him, and He has done everything needed to have that, including die for our sins in our place.

JACOB

God changed Jacob's name to Israel after he submitted to Him when they wrestled (Gen. 32:28). God then blessed him with the same covenant as Abraham in giving him a land and making him a nation (Gen. 35:9-13). Thus, God's people were given the name of Israel/Jacob. Some commentators suggest that when "Jacob" is used in the Bible, God's people were acting in their old deceitful ways; whereas when "Israel" is used, they were acting in the way God intended, in their new nature. But in various verses, the names are used as synonyms (i.e. Deut. 33:28; Ps. 53:6). so this idea cannot be universally applied.

COMMENTARY

VERSES 18-20 / God gave Israel a picture of what their restoration would look like. Ultimately, Israel's restoration will be a full and complete restoration of their covenant relationship with God. The restoration that they would experience at the end of seventy years would be but a picture of what is to come. God planned to restore every part of Israel's society, from clans dwelling in tents to royalty living in the palace.³

God also planned to turn Israel's sadness into joy. They would go from people in mourning to a people in celebration. Psalm 126:1-3 describes their restoration this way:

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Our mouths were filled with laughter then, and our tongues with shouts of joy. Then they said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them." The LORD had done great things for us; we were joyful.

God's people would go from being a scattered people, decimated by the conquering Babylonians, to a thriving nation, rebuilt following their time in exile in Babylon. Ultimately, Israel would be honored and its oppressor would be punished.

God's promise of the restoration of His people is an incredible, hope-filled promise that does not depend on the actions of the people. Instead, this promise sits on God's shoulders alone. Much like God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 15, Israel plays no role in their salvation. Rather, their salvation is all dependent on the work of God on their behalf. Though the people's actions were the reason for their exile, their actions would not be the reason for their salvation.

God's continued promise of the restoration of His people in these verses is no different in nature than the others in Jeremiah 30. This promise is eschatological in nature, meaning its fulfillment will come in eternity. Yes, after seventy years, God would bring His people back to the promise land.

But their return to the land flowing with milk and honey was a foreshadowing of what God will do when His Son, Jesus, returns. Jesus's second coming is the full and complete restoration that God was promising.

VERSES 21-22 / As Jeremiah continues his message, God's promise of restoration goes from eschatological to messianic. Here, God shows His people how their restoration will happen. The "**leader**" spoken of in verse 21 points to Jesus. Israel will no longer be ruled by a foreign king but by a ruler whom God will raise up from the nation.

Jesus will act not only as king but also as priest. He will both rule over the people of God and atone for the sin of the people of God. He would not only be drawn into the presence of God but also, in Himself, be the very presence of God with us (Matt. 1:23). He will restore the relationship, between God and His people, that was broken by sin. And His holy actions, on behalf of God's people, will cause their relationship to be restored forever.

Again, this is an incredible, hope-filled promise that won't depend on Israel but on God. This means that the coming messianic and eschatological restoration will be an eternal restoration. Eternal restoration was what the people of Israel ultimately needed. Their repeated pattern of disobedience to God and turning away from God was a problem that their return to the land of Canaan couldn't fix. They needed something greater—they needed Someone greater.

Jesus eventually came and lived a life of perfect obedience on behalf of all God's people, both Israelites and Gentiles alike, and then He died the death that we all deserve because of our sin. But Jesus didn't stay dead. Three days later, He was raised from the dead, defeating both sin and death so that all God's people will never be exiled from Him again. That's sorrow turned to joy.

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.

NOTES

HEAD:

God's love and patience, even in the face of sin, are amazing. He disciplines those He loves not because He is angry or wants retribution but in order to bring about restoration. In today's passage, the Israelites cried out to God, wanting His discipline to be removed from them. But God kept His word that He would not leave the guilty unpunished. We deserve to be exiled by God, but God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to receive the punishment that we deserved so that we can walk with Him in freedom and obedience.

How should God's promise of restoration change the way you see His discipline?

HEART:

God's promise for the ultimate restoration of humanity and creation is not a promise that depends on anything we do. We do have to surrender our lives to Jesus, but in doing so, what we're acknowledging is that we can't save ourselves. The fact that Jesus is the One who did all that we needed to be restored should fill us with hope—hope that won't put us to shame because it rests on the shoulders of Jesus alone (Rom. 5:5).

How does the completed work of Jesus on your behalf help you feel good about God's discipline in your life?

HANDS:

In today's passage, we not only see a disobedient nation punished for its sin, we also see a loving God gently explaining to them that His discipline is ultimately for their good and the good of the world around them. Jesus was punished for our sin in order to receive the joy that was set before Him—us as believers saved by grace through faith. We in turn get Jesus. To sit on such good news and not share it with those around us is a gross mishandling of our salvation.

With whom will you share the promise of healing and restoration in Jesus this week?

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."⁴

—Steven Smith

POINT 1: THE DAY OF THE LORD WILL BRING FREEDOM (JER. 30:8-11).

+ **COMMENTARY**

“Hope and Restoration (30:1–33:26). Though dark days were ahead, God would not totally abandon His people. An awful time of frightening judgment would come upon the sin-filled land. Abandoned by its allies and struck down by God, the nation would be like a man with an incurable wound. However, after this time of discipline, God would cure their wound and bring His exiled people back to the land. Exiles from the Northern Kingdom would be reunited with those from Judah, and together they would serve the Lord and His appointed Davidic ruler. The people would increase in numbers and enjoy a renewed relationship with God.”⁵

+ **ILLUSTRATION**

When Charles Swindoll first received his driver’s license, his father decided to give him a reward. He told him that he could have his car for two full hours on his own. Those last three words rang in his mind as the bells of freedom. He made his way out of the driveway and began his two hours of freedom in his father’s car with all kinds of crazy thoughts in his head. He thought about the speed of the car and how fast it could go. He thought about where he could go and the kinds of things he could do along the way. He felt complete freedom, and he felt that because there was no one in the car with him. No one was there in the car to stop him. And no one would be surprised if he went a little crazy on the drive. But he didn’t. In fact, when he recalled this story in his book *The Grace Awakening*, he doesn’t believe he ever went over the speed limit. He even pulled into the driveway early. What would possess a teenager to respond in such a way? It had to be nothing else than a relationship with his father built on trust.⁶

This is the type of relationship the Israelites could have and should have had with their God, but they constantly found themselves abusing their freedom as if no one was there to restrain them. All the while, God was patiently waiting for them to return. But they never did.

EXTRA

POINT 2: THE DAY OF THE LORD WILL BRING HEALING

(JER. 30:12-17).

+ COMMENTARY

“In the context of the so-called Book of Consolation [Jeremiah 30–33], how could vv. 12–15 bring consolation to Israel? The answer is found in vv. 16–17. Those who would bring suffering to Israel would also be caused to suffer, the devourers would be devoured, the exiles would be exiled, the plunderers would be plundered, and the spoilers would be spoiled. The wicked nations the Lord would use in punishing Israel would get away with nothing. Their wickedness motivated by evil hearts would not be overlooked just because the Lord’s wisdom and power were able to direct it to serve his purposes. The enemies who would be ‘devoured’ are not identified, but Babylon would head the list (cf. 2:3; 5:17; 8:16; 10:25).”⁷

+ COMMENTARY

“When this poem was written, probably near the fall of Jerusalem, the wound caused by Judah’s sin was incurable and beyond healing (30:12; Lam 2:13). There was no remedy, because the people of Judah had abandoned Yahweh who alone could heal and restore them (30:13). All Judah’s allies—her ‘lovers’—have forgotten her and no longer care (30:14; see 3:1; Lam 1:2). These allies may be the nations who had come for the conference with Zedekiah (. . . 27:3). When the Babylonians came, all deserted Judah. Edom aligned with Babylon to become Judah’s enemy (see Obad 8:14). Egypt, which had encouraged Judah to rebel against her overlord on a number of occasions, was routed by the Babylonians in 588 BC—shortly before Jerusalem fell (37:5-7; see 2 Kgs 18:19-21). Egypt’s days as a world power were over. Judah’s allies could not be trusted.”⁸

+ OPTIONAL TEACHING ACTIVITY

Ask your group this question:

“What bodily processes would be required for a dead person to come back to life?”

After they have provided some answers, use the following explanation to help them see that God needed to do more than just take Israel home; He needed to make them alive again:

In order for something dead to come alive again, a lot would have to happen. The brain would have to start firing again. The heart would have to start beating again. Lungs would have to start breathing again. Dead muscles would have to be reactivated. And in all of these processes, cells that were dead would have to come back to life. Israel’s relationship with the Lord was dead. They had isolated themselves from the only source of life, and the result of that isolation was death. In God exiling Judah to Babylon and telling them they would be there for seventy years, He was essentially saying that He needed to bring back to life that which was dead. Their time in exile had as its purpose the restoration of a relationship that was irreparable without the Lord’s intervention.

POINT 3: THE DAY OF THE LORD WILL BRING RESTORATION (JER. 30:18-22).

+ COMMENTARY

“30:18–20 In these verses a whole new day, not just a restoration, is promised for Israel. Jerusalem will be rebuilt, repopulated, and ruled by a new leader who is responsive to God . . .

“30:21–22 This messianic prophecy emphasizes three functions. (1) The Messiah will be a native (one of them), not a foreigner. (2) He will carry the priestly prerogative, which allows him to approach the Lord like Melchizedek (Heb 5:5–6). (3) He will declare You will be my people, and I will be your God.”⁹

ILLUSTRATION

Have your group members recount times when they were kids when they were disciplined for doing something they knew they shouldn't. For example:

As a kid, you always wanted to eat a cookie or a brownie before dinner. But your parents wouldn't let you because committing such a grievous act would ruin your dinner. Now as an adult, you might eat the cookie before dinner, but so often when you do, you wish you hadn't.

When you were a kid, you always wanted to stay up late and did not want to go to bed at your bedtime. You didn't realize how unbearable you were when you didn't get enough sleep. Now as an adult, you'd do anything just to get one more hour of sleep.

These are two silly and light-hearted examples, but these things that you used to wish you could do as a kid, that you now can do as an adult but don't do, illustrate a great point about the wisdom of God. Most of us are now probably willing to admit that we were wrong and our parents were right. The gap between their wisdom and ours was so wide. How much more wide is the gap between our wisdom and the wisdom of God!

God's commands in the Bible don't exist just to make our lives more restricting. They exist because they are for our good and for the good of our relationship with our heavenly Father. Israel, when they chose not to listen to God, did so because they didn't understand that gap and chose to do what they thought was best. May we not find ourselves disobedient like they were. And when we do, may we find ourselves repentant like they weren't.

References

1. Francis A. Schaeffer, *True Spirituality* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1971), 15.
2. F. B. Huey, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, vol. 16, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 1993), 265.
3. Paul R. House, “Jeremiah,” in *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 1427, Jer. 30:18.
4. Steven Smith, *Exalting Jesus in Jeremiah, Lamentations, Christ-Centered Exposition* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2019) [Logos].
5. Robert B. Chisholm, “The Major Prophets,” in *Holman Concise Bible Commentary*, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville, TN: B&H, 1998), 303.
6. Craig Brian Larson, “Freedom,” in *750 Engaging Illustrations: For Preachers, Teachers & Writers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 185-86.
7. F. B. Huey, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, vol. 16, *The New American Commentary*, 265.
8. Paul Swarup, “Jeremiah,” in *South Asia Bible Commentary*, gen. ed. Brian Wintle (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 978.
9. Walter Kaiser Jr., “Jeremiah,” in *CSB Study Bible*, eds. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1188.

GOD'S REWARD FOR THE FAITHFUL

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. Faithfulness to God is tested (Dan. 1:8).
2. Faithfulness to God is affirmed (Dan. 1:9-16).
3. Faithfulness to God is rewarded (Dan. 1:17-21).

Background Passage: Daniel 1

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

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

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

When Daniel and his friends were tested, their unwavering faithfulness to God was rewarded. Jesus was likewise tested during His earthly ministry, but He remained faithful to the Father so that all who trust in Him might be rewarded with eternal life with Him.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

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.

GROUP TIME

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

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.

EXPLAIN: Though Israel was captured and exiled because of their disobedience, there were still some who remained obedient to the Lord God even in the midst of their captivity.

DISCUSS: **Do you find it easier to be faithful to God during times of ease or times of trial? Why?** (wait for a group member to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion)

TRANSITION: The opening story in the book of Daniel is a story of faithfulness. First and foremost, it is a story about God's faithfulness to His people. But we're also introduced to four faithful young men, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, who refused to allow their situation to turn them away from their God. Today, as we look at Daniel 1, let's see it through the lens of God's faithfulness to His people. True stories like this one should strengthen our resolve to trust God and remain faithful to Him no matter what situations we might encounter.

OPTIONAL QUESTION: **How might seeing God's faithfulness to His people strengthen your resolve to remain faithful to Him?** (helps us to trust that He'll be faithful to us; allows us to see the goodness of God in ways we might not otherwise see; gives us the ability to see His faithfulness in a tangible way)

POINT 1

FAITHFULNESS TO GOD IS TESTED (DAN. 1:8).

8 Daniel determined that he would not defile himself with the king's food or with the wine he drank. So he asked permission from the chief eunuch not to defile himself.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Daniel 1:8** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 8A** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the Daily Discipleship Guide [DDG]*):

Daniel was determined to not **defile** himself, and because his **relationship** with God was firm, his faithfulness stood firm.

DISCUSS: What opportunities from the world tempt believers today to defile themselves? (watching movies or shows that defy God's standards; laughing at jokes that don't hold up God's image in all humans; subtle sins that may become bigger ones, such as white lies, cheating on taxes, etc.)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 8B** commentary to explain that we can't work for our own justification; this is the work of the Lord (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

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 (Eph. 2:10). Faith without works is **dead** (Jas. 2:17). While good works do not establish justification, they do verify a genuine faith and make our justification evident to others.

DISCUSS: How should the reality that we can't work to justify ourselves before God change the way we see our work for God? (we are freed to feel joy in our work for God; we can stop feeling like we have to do better or be good enough to come to God; we are relieved of the pressure to be perfect)

TRANSITION: When we are faced with seemingly impossible situations where our faithfulness to God is tested, we must resolve to remain faithful no matter what. God sees everything, and when we're faced with hardships, He's not absent from our situation. In fact, God is watching over us and He will, in some shape or form, affirm our faithfulness, just as He did for Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.

NOTES

DIETARY LAWS OF GOD

In Leviticus 11, God laid out the rules for what the Israelites could eat or not eat. Israel was called to be a holy and separate people, so the dietary laws were to remind them that they were different from the nations as a people set apart by God and for God.

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."¹

—J. I. Packer (1926-2020)

COMMENTARY

VERSE 8A / Daniel 1 is an incredible story about trusting in the faithfulness of God. Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah all understood the situation that they were in. They understood they weren't in control, but they also understood that the king of Babylon wasn't in control. They believed God was orchestrating all of the events that were taking place for the good of His people.

If we go back to the beginning of this chapter, we see several things happening that prove God is in control of this entire situation. When the king of Babylon laid siege to Jerusalem, God gave the king of Judah, Jehoiakim, into his hands (vv. 1-2). Jehoiakim's defeat was complete and total. But Judah didn't just lose their king; they lost a host of their people to exile and much of what identified them as the people of God, including some of the vessels from the house of God. Eventually, Israel would lose complete control of the promise land through an even broader exile.

The king of Babylon ordered young men with promise from the royal family in Judah to be brought into his palace (vv. 3-4). These men would lose their ability to eat a diet based on the law of God and would be forced to eat food that was both unclean and potentially used as sacrifices to idols. And they would be taught and trained in all things Babylon for three years (v. 5).

This would have been an amazing opportunity for the young men of the royal family of Judah to have status, influence, and power in a foreign land. No other Israelite would get this opportunity. Most of Israel would spend these seventy years (Jer. 29:10) in captivity as just that, captives. Daniel and all of the other young men had an opportunity to thrive and excel. But in order for them to do so, they would have to continue in the sin that made them exiles in the first place, worshiping and serving foreign gods. And one of the things we have to keep in mind is that the king they would be potentially serving at the end of their three years of training was a narcissistic

hothead (Dan. 3:1-13). They seemingly had but two choices: align themselves with this new nation by abandoning their God or lose their lives.

Now, none of what happened to Judah meant that God had been defeated by the false gods of Babylon. It didn't even mean that God had abandoned His people. As we saw in the previous session, God was in complete control of this entire situation. Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah all knew that. And they chose their battles well. They didn't fight against being taken captive, they didn't fight against the education, and they didn't fight against their name change, which was a pretty major deal because their new Babylonian names reflected the Babylonian gods. But of this one thing—of being defiled and unclean before their God, the God of Israel, with regard to food and drink—they chose to fight.

VERSE 8B / In the second part of verse 8, we see that Daniel's determination not to defile himself before God at no point turned into disrespect toward his human overseers. He didn't stand up at the table and shout for all to hear that he wouldn't eat the food. He didn't flip the tables and announce that everyone who was eating the food was unclean and should be ashamed. Instead, he asked for permission from the chief eunuch not to defile himself.

Thus, these four young men did not defile themselves and were respectful to their captors, not because they believed that their actions, in themselves, could justify them before God, but because they believed that only their being God's chosen people gave them the ability to stand before God. They didn't want to do anything to hurt that relationship with God. They didn't want to be unclean before Him. Their determination was a result of their relationship with God and God's promises to the nation, not them trying to work to get something from God. Their obedience though was a sure sign of their already existing faith.

POINT 2

FAITHFULNESS TO GOD IS AFFIRMED (DAN. 1:9-16).

NOTES

9 God had granted Daniel kindness and compassion from the chief eunuch, **10** yet he said to Daniel, “I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and drink. What if he sees your faces looking thinner than the other young men your age? You would endanger my life with the king.” **11** So Daniel said to the guard whom the chief eunuch had assigned to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, **12** “Please test your servants for ten days. Let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. **13** Then examine our appearance and the appearance of the young men who are eating the king’s food, and deal with your servants based on what you see.” **14** He agreed with them about this and tested them for ten days. **15** At the end of ten days they looked better and healthier than all the young men who were eating the king’s food. **16** So the guard continued to remove their food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Daniel 1:9-16** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 9-14** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

Daniel and his friends acted with wisdom and **grace**, both to remain faithful to God and to **honor** God’s image-bearers, even in the midst of a **dangerous** and compromising situation.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 15-16** commentary to emphasize the following idea (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

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

DISCUSS: Pass out copies of **PACK ITEM 5: NO MATTER THE COST**, and then ask: **What are some ways God affirms faithfulness even if He doesn’t provide for or rescue His people from trials?** (God may rescue His people by carrying them through the trial; God can use one’s faithful testimony in life or death to convict a sinner’s heart and bring them to faith; ultimately, a believer’s faithfulness is affirmed through the resurrection from the dead and glorification to come at Jesus’s second coming)

TRANSITION: God responded to Daniel and his three friend’s faithfulness by giving them a couple of things they wouldn’t have had otherwise. What’s incredible is that the reward they received in the next few verses is awesome, but they would have remained faithful to God even without that reward.



COMMENTARY

VERSES 9-14 / In verse 9, we once again see that God is in control, even in the midst of this complicated situation. Daniel and his three friends had resolved not to eat the king's food or drink his wine because they didn't want to defile themselves. But they didn't demand that they get food that aligned with their law-based diet, nor did they go on a hunger strike. They quietly asked for permission not to defile themselves with the king's food and drink.

In verse 9, God gave them **"kindness and compassion"** from the chief of the eunuchs. Both of these words contain the idea of a specific type of favor that God gave them in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs, one based on an ongoing relationship.² We aren't told here of any kind of relationship that Daniel and his friends may have had with the chief of the eunuchs, but as we can see from his reply in verse 10, the eunuch did respond the way a friend might, in this sort of situation. He initially responded with a no, but not because their request upset him; rather, he feared that his life could be in danger if they were not presentable to the king.

The king himself was giving these young men the food that they were supposed to eat. As we have already stated, this was a privilege only afforded to a few people. Refusing the king's food would be to dishonor the king and to put their lives in danger. In fact, even making this request to the chief of the eunuchs put their lives in danger, for had he gone to the king and reported their request to him, they certainly would have been brought before the king and judged. But God gave them favor with their steward and he looked upon Daniel and the other three young men with kindness and compassion. And even though he told them no, his no had nothing to do with his feelings towards their request; it had everything to do with his fear of the king.

We often, if not always, find ourselves in situations where we have to choose

between God and sin. Oftentimes we don't respond like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Though our loud proclamations of the truth may seem noble and are at times good and right, God always uses the humble responses of His people to accomplish His will. In this story, Daniel and his friends didn't try to strong-arm their way into obedience to the law. Instead, they trusted in the faithfulness of God. Their faithfulness to God's law in a civil manner was ultimately an act of trust in God's faithfulness to His people. For even after the chief of the eunuchs denied their request, they then turned to the guard that the chief of the eunuchs had placed over their food. Once again risking their lives, they asked the guard to test them for ten days. They asked if he would allow them to only eat vegetables and drink water for ten days and see if their appearance was better or worse than that of the other young men. By God's favor and grace, the guard agreed to do this.

VERSES 15-16 / In this section, we begin to see the reward that the Hebrews' faithfulness to God earned them: they **"looked better and were healthier than all the young men who were eating the king's food."** But perhaps the greatest reward that they received was what we see in verse 16: the guard that was placed over their food continued to feed them only vegetables to eat and water to drink for the next three years. Here we see their faithfulness to God rewarded by them not having to defile themselves before God.

God affirmed the faithfulness of these young men by granting them kindness and compassion from seeming enemies and by making them healthier in appearance than all the other young men. We know it is possible that God could have chosen not to grant them favor or even not to make them healthier in appearance, but to Daniel and his friends, that didn't matter. Ultimately, what mattered to them was that they were found faithful to God.

POINT 3

FAITHFULNESS TO GOD IS REWARDED

(DAN. 1:17-21).

17 God gave these four young men knowledge and understanding in every kind of literature and wisdom. Daniel also understood visions and dreams of every kind. **18** At the end of the time that the king had said to present them, the chief eunuch presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. **19** The king interviewed them, and among all of them, no one was found equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. So they began to attend the king. **20** In every matter of wisdom and understanding that the king consulted them about, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and mediums in his entire kingdom. **21** Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Daniel 1:17-21** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 17** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

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

DISCUSS: Why should we see God's using us with our gifts and talents as a **reward**? (we get to partner with God the Almighty in His redemptive work; we know that what He accomplishes is successful; we get to experience the joy of seeing others come into the kingdom and family of God through faith in Jesus)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 18-21** commentary to emphasize the following idea (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

Daniel and his friends all **obeyed** 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 **glory**.

NOTES

KING CYRUS

Cyrus was the founder of the Persian empire. He was a great conqueror and a benevolent ruler. He didn't believe in assimilation as a means of control but allowed each conquered nation, including the Jews, to hold onto their culture and traditions. As foretold by name (Isa. 44:28-45:1), Cyrus would be the one to allow the Jews to return to the promised land and rebuild the temple.

COMMENTARY

VERSE 17 / In verse 17, we see repeated for the third time the words **“God gave.”** Throughout this entire narrative, God has been in control of the events surrounding His people, specifically Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Because of their faithfulness to God, the Lord gave these four young men knowledge, understanding, and wisdom, meaning that God gave them an extraordinary ability to learn, understand, and act accordingly. This would become a useful skill for them as they continued to grow in their power and influence in service to the king of Babylon.

All four of these young men were given those abilities, but Daniel was rewarded with an additional ability to understand visions and dreams. During Daniel’s time, this gift was significant, especially in Babylon. The Babylonians believed that their gods (who, of course, were false gods) communicated through dreams. Daniel 1:17, then, serves as the backdrop for the book as a whole and the work that God would do through Daniel as he later interpreted dreams and visions.³ Daniel’s God-given ability to see and understand visions and dreams helped him be the conduit of God’s revelation of Himself to the Babylonians.

The reward for faithfulness to God, then, is far more than a position, status, or power. The primary reward for faithfulness to God is the ability to be an instrument that He uses to make Himself known in all the world. Ultimately, the reward we all long for is an eternity in the home we were made for in the presence of Jesus. Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah all had that view in mind as they faced this seemingly impossible situation. They understood that their lives weren’t wrapped up in where they were, what they did, or in a position they held. Their lives were wrapped up in a relationship with the one true God that was tested, affirmed, and now rewarded.

VERSES 18-21 / When the time came for these young Hebrew men, exiles in training, to be brought before the king, Nebu-

chadnezzar found none like Daniel and his friends. A further reward that Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah all received for their faithfulness to God was the ability to serve and attend the king. Again, if we keep the reality of their situation in view, then we see that their service to the king had a purpose far greater than their filling a position in King Nebuchadnezzar’s palace. God had plans to use them to display His authority and power to the king and to everyone under his rule.

In their service to the king, these men were found to be ten times more capable than all of the magicians and mediums in his entire kingdom. This gave them a special place of importance with the king. He would eventually look to them concerning all matters of wisdom and understanding. And since their wisdom and understanding was given to them by God, their position would ultimately be used by God to advance His mission of making His name known throughout the world. More specifically for the nation of Israel, Daniel and his three friends would make the seventy years for Judah in Babylon a little easier and they would grow to be a strong nation once again.

When we look at a passage like this, we often think about Bible characters like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah as people with superhero-level faithfulness. Their faith was placed in the King of the universe, but their faith wasn’t other-worldly. They were just teenage boys caught in a situation where they could either choose to compromise and sin against God or they could be faithful to God, even though they faced tough odds. They chose God in their situation. They didn’t know what immediate harm would befall them, but they chose to trust in His faithfulness. They trusted not simply that God would make everything okay but that God’s promise to Israel to use them to bless all nations still stood. And they obeyed God to get more of God, not to get what God could give them.

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:

When we find ourselves in situations where we have to choose between God or compromising what we believe, no matter how impossible the situation may feel, the decision to remain faithful to God is always the better choice, not just because it's what we're supposed to do, but because being faithful to God is what we were made to do. Looking back at stories like the story of Daniel and his three friends reminds us of God's faithfulness to His people when His people remain faithful to Him. But even when we aren't faithful, like Judah in the situation they found themselves in during the Babylonian captivity, God's promise of salvation through Jesus remains unwavering.

What reasons do you have for remaining faithful to God even when your circumstances are difficult or dangerous?

HEART:

God, through His Son, Jesus, has given us the ability to live in His presence. Yet our world still vies for our attention and provides ample opportunities for us to "defile" ourselves and make us unclean and disobedient before God. Sometimes Satan tempts us, sometimes it's the world, sometimes it's our flesh. But praise God that if we do succumb to the temptation and sin, God will forgive us of our sin if we confess it to Him.

What sins or temptations do you need to confess to God today that He might forgive you and give you strength to overcome?

HANDS:

Every single day, we face opportunities where we can either choose to be faithful to God or not. Most of those choices won't have life or death consequences like the choice that Daniel and his friends had to make. However, it's us choosing to be faithful even in the little things that will help us to remain faithful in the big things. One of our primary responsibilities that we as believers in Christ have on earth is to remain faithful to God's gospel mission. God's desire is that none should perish. So when the choice is be faithful to God or avoid a potentially awkward conversation, faithfulness to God is always the right decision.

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."⁴

—Ignatius of Antioch
(c. 35-107)

POINT 1: FAITHFULNESS TO GOD IS TESTED (DAN. 1:8).

+ COMMENTARY

“Seventy years, seventy years, and you know something? When I see Ezra chapter 1 and all the people going back to Jerusalem, you know who’s behind that? Daniel. When I see the wise men coming from the east, I have to see lurking in the shadows, Daniel. God gave him influence, influence that led, I believe, to the decree of Cyrus to send the people back to their land. Influence that led to the rebuilding of the wall with Nehemiah. Influence that led to the reestablishing of the nation Israel. Influence that led the wise men to come to crown the King who was born in Bethlehem. He is behind the scenes of the history of the Messiah, as well as the Messiah’s people. He has an unlimited influence, for he it is who brings homage to the King who is the King of kings and Lord of lords, who reigns forever.”⁵

+ OPTIONAL TEACHING ACTIVITY

Be mindful of your group’s dynamics and circumstances before you commit to this activity. Have your group stand together and do the human knot. Explain that the point of this activity is for your group to go from being one giant knot to being completely untangled without letting go of each other’s hands. Begin with everyone standing in a circle and have everyone begin by joining their left hand with someone else’s left hand that’s across from them. And then have them join their right hand with someone different. Now have your group try to untangle the knot without letting go of the hands they are holding by maneuvering around one another until they end up in a circle.

Once untangled, ask them what they thought was most difficult. Many of your group members will either say that it was maneuvering around each other or not letting go of the hands they were holding. Because of its difficulty, people may find it hard to be faithful to complete the task without breaking the rules. Some people might not want to complete the task at all. The groups that typically complete this activity are the ones that work together and have a strong resolve to finish without compromising. It’s so much easier to be faithful when we are surrounded by others who are faithful. That’s what Daniel and his friends had, and they refused to bend in the face of pressure.

EXTRA

POINT 2: FAITHFULNESS TO GOD IS AFFIRMED (DAN. 1:9-16).

+ COMMENTARY

“Daniel exhibits a wisdom far beyond his years, a wisdom that could have only come from God. It appears there are only two options. Option 1: They defile themselves. Option 2: Their new friend Ashpenaz loses his head. Daniel, however, proposes a third way, one in which everybody wins. He drops down the chain of command to the steward or “guard” (NIV) that Ashpenaz had assigned over them and proposes the following solution:

Please test your servants for ten days . . .

The number ten may be either literal or symbolic, but the main point is that Daniel asks for a test—one that essentially puts his God to the test. He believes and trusts God to honor their convictions and commitments to obeying his Word.”⁶

+ ILLUSTRATION

“In Christianity Today, writer Philip Yancey recalls his first visit to Yellowstone National Park’s Old Faithful like this:

I remember my first visit to Old Faithful in Yellowstone National Park . . .

My wife and I passed the countdown in the dining room of Old Faithful Inn overlooking the geyser. When the digital clock reached one minute, we, along with every other diner, left our seats and rushed to the windows to see the big, wet event.

I noticed that immediately, as if on signal, a crew of busboys and waiters descended on the tables to refill water glasses and clear away dirty dishes. When the geyser went off, we tourists oohed and aahed and clicked our cameras; a few spontaneously applauded. But, glancing back over my shoulder, I saw that not a single waiter or busboy—not even those who had finished their chores—looked out the huge windows. Old Faithful, grown entirely too familiar, had lost its power to impress them.”⁷

Many people take for granted the faithfulness of God in their everyday lives. God is faithful in so many small things that it’s easy for His faithfulness to feel like white noise, something we tune out. But we should never look at the faithfulness of God as something to be tuned out. It would have been easy for Daniel and his friends to tune out God in captivity, but they remained faithful, even as they faced this seemingly impossible situation.

POINT 3: FAITHFULNESS TO GOD IS REWARDED (DAN. 1:17-21).

+ COMMENTARY

“For the third time in the chapter, we read that God gave something to someone. In 1:2, he gave Jehoiakim and Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar. In 1:9, God gave the chief official sympathy toward Daniel and his friends. Now (v. 17) we read that God gave the four Judeans ‘knowledge and understanding.’ Of course, Nebuchadnezzar and those involved in their education would take credit for their brilliance, but Daniel and the others would know to whom the credit was

due. This section anticipates the next chapter, where the plot revolves around God's granting wisdom to Daniel through revelation (cf. 2:22). After all, they had grown physically robust not because of their Babylonian diet but because of the grace of God, that is, in spite of their diet of vegetables. The effect of the theme of 'God's giving' throughout the chapter is to press home who is really in control of the events of Daniel's life."⁸

+ ILLUSTRATION

"In his book *Talking to My Father*, Ray Stedman writes:

An old missionary couple had been working in Africa for years, and they were returning to New York City to retire. They had no pension; their health was broken; they were defeated, discouraged, and afraid. They discovered they were booked on the same ship as President Teddy Roosevelt, who was returning from one of his big-game hunting expeditions. No one paid attention to them. They watched the fanfare that accompanied the President's entourage, with passengers trying to catch a glimpse of the great man.

As the ship moved across the ocean, the old missionary said to his wife, "Something is wrong. Why should we have given our lives in faithful service for God in Africa all these many years and have no one care a thing about us? Here this man comes back from a hunting trip and everybody makes much over him, but nobody gives two hoots about us." "Dear, you shouldn't feel that way," his wife said. "I can't help it; it doesn't seem right."

When the ship docked in New York, a band was waiting to greet the President. The mayor and other dignitaries were there. The papers were full of the President's arrival, but no one noticed this missionary couple. They slipped off the ship and found a cheap flat on the East side, hoping the next day to see what they could do to make a living in the city. That night the man's spirit broke. He said to his wife, "I can't take this; God is not treating us fairly." His wife replied, "Why don't you go in the bedroom and tell that to the Lord?" A short time later he came out from the bedroom, but now his face was completely different. His wife asked, "Dear, what happened?" "The Lord settled it with me," he said. "I told him how bitter I was that the President should receive this tremendous homecoming, when no one met us as we returned home. And when I finished, it seemed as though the Lord put his hand on my shoulder and simply said, 'But you're not home yet!'"⁹

Yes, there are rewards for faithfulness, but not necessarily down here.

References

1. J. I. Packer, *God's Plans for You* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 45.
2. Willem VanGemeren, ed., "Favor," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 204.
3. John MacArthur, "The Consequences of an Uncompromising Life, Part 2," November 4, 1979, <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/27-05/the-consequences-of-an-uncompromising-life-part-2>.
4. William R. Schoedel, *Saint Ignatius Bishop of Antioch*, and Helmut Koester, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985), 181.
5. John MacArthur, "The Consequences of an Uncompromising Life, Part 2," November 4, 1979, <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/27-05/the-consequences-of-an-uncompromising-life-part-2>.
6. Daniel L. Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Daniel*, *Christ-Centered Exposition* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2017) [Logos].
7. Craig Brian Larson, "Faithfulness of God," in *750 Engaging Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers & Writers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 161-62.
8. Tremper Longman III, *Daniel*, *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 54-55.
9. Craig Brian Larson, "Rewards," in *750 Engaging Illustrations: For Preachers, Teachers & Writers*, 461-62.

GOD'S JUDGMENT OF THE PRIDEFUL

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. The Lord confronts those who profane that which is holy (Dan. 5:1-8).
2. The Lord rebukes those who exalt themselves instead of Him (Dan. 5:22-24).
3. The Lord judges those who are found to be deficient (Dan. 5:25-30).

Background Passage: Daniel 5

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

God stands against the proud and will humble them.

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

King Belshazzar's pride led him to profane the temple's holy vessels, and he was judged for his sin. Jesus's humility led Him to come to earth so that He might be profaned by humanity and become the sinless sacrifice judged for the sins of the world.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

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.

GROUP TIME

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

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.

INSTRUCT: Ask your group to think about someone they know who has high character and humility. And then ask them to think of someone they know who doesn't.

DISCUSS: How do you think people end up with either good or bad character? (their actions over time; the people they spend time with; acknowledging God's rule over the earth or refusing to recognize this truth; their view of themselves in realistic ways or prideful ways)

TRANSITION: Today's biblical story doesn't focus much on Daniel. But God used Daniel's giftings to shed light on His judgment of King Belshazzar, a man of foolish pride and very low moral and spiritual character. He believed himself to be above God, so much so that he chose to challenge God. But this challenge, as we'll see in today's session, did not go well for him.

OPTIONAL QUESTION: What are some things we can do to stop ourselves from giving in to our sinful, foolish pride? (study God's Word to know God more and who we are in light of Him; surround ourselves with godly people to keep us accountable; spend time in prayer asking God to show us where we need to grow)

POINT 1

THE LORD CONFRONTS THOSE WHO PROFANE THAT WHICH IS HOLY (DAN. 5:1-8).

NOTES

1 King Belshazzar held a great feast for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine in their presence. **2** Under the influence of the wine, Belshazzar gave orders to bring in the gold and silver vessels that his predecessor Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, wives, and concubines could drink from them. **3** So they brought in the gold vessels that had been taken from the temple, the house of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his nobles, wives, and concubines drank from them. **4** They drank the wine and praised their gods made of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone. **5** At that moment the fingers of a man's hand appeared and began writing on the plaster of the king's palace wall next to the lampstand. As the king watched the hand that was writing, **6** his face turned pale, and his thoughts so terrified him that he soiled himself and his knees knocked together. **7** The king shouted to bring in the mediums, Chaldeans, and diviners. He said to these wise men of Babylon, "Whoever reads this inscription and gives me its interpretation will be clothed in purple, have a gold chain around his neck, and have the third highest position in the kingdom." **8** So all the king's wise men came in, but none could read the inscription or make its interpretation known to him.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Daniel 5:1-8** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 1-4** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the Daily Discipleship Guide [DDG]*):

King Belshazzar's **pride** and foolishness led him to dismiss and disdain the one and only **holy** God.

DISCUSS: What are some ways you see an attitude of pride in our world today? (in our culture's response to abortion; in how people don't see God's image in every person; in the way people treat the Word of God; in people's denial and rejection of God's commands and design for sexuality)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 5-8** commentary to emphasize the following idea (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

God's **judgment** was coming for Belshazzar because of his **sin**, idolatry, and lack of reverence for God and His holiness.

TRANSITION: Belshazzar's foolish pride was evident in his actions, but he did not yet understand his offense—this earthly king had set himself up as greater than the God of Israel, the sovereign Creator of everyone and everything.

THE ARTICLES FROM THE TEMPLE

When Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem and took people into captivity around 605 BC, he also took vessels from the house of God (cups, bowls, pitchers, etc.) and took them to the treasury of his god in Babylon (Dan. 1:2). Later, at the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 586 BC, he completed the job (2 Chron. 36:18). Here, Belshazzar had the audacity to use these holy vessels for his pleasure.

COMMENTARY

VERSES 1-4 / In Daniel 5, we are immediately introduced to a new historical figure. Belshazzar is described as the successor and son of Nebuchadnezzar, which entails a loose but historically acceptable rendering of “predecessor” or “father.” His biological father, Nabonidus, reigned as king, but Belshazzar did reign as a co-ruler. At this time, Nabonidus had been defeated in battle by King Darius and the Persian army.¹ As regent, Belshazzar ruled from Babylon in his father’s stead, but as the end of this chapter suggests, the Persian army was sitting on the doorstep of Babylon ready to complete its conquest.

Belshazzar, unfortunately, was a foolish, prideful man. In the first four verses of Daniel 5, Belshazzar did three things that put his arrogance on display, ultimately sealing his fate as a conquered king.

First, Belshazzar threw a party with one thousand of his nobles. Now, this wasn’t out of the norm for a Babylonian king. But the fact that he threw this party with the mighty Persian army knocking on his door shows that he was, at a minimum, out of touch with reality or too prideful to think he could be conquered. So instead of preparing for that fight, he threw a party, presumably as a morale booster.

The next thing he did was drink and get drunk in front of his party guests. While this may seem insignificant, it wasn’t customary for a Babylonian king to be in full sight of his party guests, let alone be seen drinking and getting drunk.² Maybe kings didn’t do that for their own protection or it just wasn’t dignified. Nonetheless, Belshazzar, wanting to be seen and heard, chose not to listen to the wisdom of past kings.

Finally, in his foolish pride, he commanded that vessels from the temple in Jerusalem be brought out to drink from. This was his way of saying that he didn’t fear the God of the Hebrews. He then proceeded to praise his Babylonian idols while he drank wine

from the vessels from the house of God, thus sealing his fate before the Lord God.

VERSES 5-8 / The moment that Belshazzar began worshiping his gods, fingers appeared out of thin air and began writing a message on the walls of the throne room right next to the lampstand to ensure that everyone present could see what was happening. Belshazzar’s immediate response was physical as his body responded to the angst in his mind. His face turned pale as he immediately found himself sober. He then lost control of his lower body, which could have caused him to soil himself in front of all of his nobles, wives, and concubines.

He then called out for the Babylonian wise men to come in and tell him what the message meant. These verses in the context of the first four chapters of Daniel telegraph what is to come. Daniel was ten times better than all the wise men in Babylon (Dan. 1:20). But Belshazzar called on his wise men, and they all stood there bewildered, unable to decipher the message.

God’s judgment against Babylon was imminent. Isaiah’s prophetic words about Babylon were coming true (Isa. 13; 21:1-10). God’s desire is for all nations to know that He alone is God. All throughout the early chapters of Daniel, God was working to make His name famous as He orchestrated each and every event for His glory. King Belshazzar ignored all of the signs of God’s glory to his own demise.

If we’re not careful, we can find ourselves doing the same thing. Every time we sin, we’re ignoring the glory of God all around us, defiling His temple, which is us, and bowing down to idols while we do it. But God is holy and He calls all people made in His image to be holy. But because of sin, we don’t have the ability to live up to the standard of holiness that God requires. Yet because of His love for us, God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to live a holy life and take the punishment of death in our place.

POINT 2

THE LORD REBUKES THOSE WHO EXALT THEMSELVES INSTEAD OF HIM (DAN. 5:22-24).

22 “But you his successor, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, even though you knew all this. **23** Instead, you have exalted yourself against the Lord of the heavens. The vessels from his house were brought to you, and as you and your nobles, wives, and concubines drank wine from them, you praised the gods made of silver and gold, bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or understand. But you have not glorified the God who holds your life-breath in his hand and who controls the whole course of your life. **24** Therefore, he sent the hand, and this writing was inscribed.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Daniel 5:22-24** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Pass out copies of **PACK ITEM 6: KINGS OF THE EXILE**, and use the Nebuchadnezzar section on the handout and the **VERSES 22-23** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Daniel **rebuked** Belshazzar for his arrogance and sinfulness in **exalting** himself above God, the Creator and Sustainer of all life.

DISCUSS: How can all sin be connected to the idea that we exalt ourselves above God? (all sin shows we think we know better than God; sin shows we think we're more important than God and His will; sin shows we think we're in control more than God)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 24** commentary to emphasize the doctrine that God is holy and holiness is the standard that He holds all humankind to (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

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.

DISCUSS: What are some ways we can grow in our efforts to reflect God's holiness? (read the Word of God; pray; meditate on Scripture; rest in God's gracious salvation; seek accountability with other believers; be honest with God and others about our sins and temptations through confession)

TRANSITION: Jesus has fulfilled the standard of holiness that God calls all people to by living and dying in our place. This is not a license to sin, however. Growth in holiness is the fruit of salvation. In the end, we will be judged by God, and that judgment will either be based on our work or the finished work of Jesus.

NOTES

KING	REIGN	SIGNIFICANT EVENTS
Nabonidus	556-539 BC	Belshazzar's Feast; Fall of Babylon
Belshazzar	539 BC	Belshazzar's Feast
Belshazzar	539 BC	Belshazzar's Feast
Belshazzar	539 BC	Belshazzar's Feast
Belshazzar	539 BC	Belshazzar's Feast
Belshazzar	539 BC	Belshazzar's Feast
Belshazzar	539 BC	Belshazzar's Feast
Belshazzar	539 BC	Belshazzar's Feast
Belshazzar	539 BC	Belshazzar's Feast
Belshazzar	539 BC	Belshazzar's Feast

KING NEBUCHADNEZZAR

One of Belshazzar's predecessors, by only a decade or two, was King Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel interpreted one of this king's dreams to foretell that because of the king's pride, he would be driven away from his people, living wildly with the animals until he humbled himself and acknowledged and praised the Lord. After seven years, the king humbled himself and was restored to his throne by the Lord (Dan. 4; 5:18-21).

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.”³

—Bryan Chapell

COMMENTARY

VERSES 22-23 / Verse 22 begins with a startling statement that screams disaster is coming. What was it that Belshazzar refused to acknowledge that was bringing God's impending judgment? In verses 13-21, Daniel was brought in before the king and offered all of the same rewards that Belshazzar offered his wise men who couldn't solve the message written on the wall. Daniel then proceeded to rebuke the king by reminding him of the humiliation of King Nebuchadnezzar. God gave Nebuchadnezzar all that he had, but it only served to swell Nebuchadnezzar's head into thinking he was something greater than he actually was. So God humbled Nebuchadnezzar until he acknowledged God's lordship over all. Belshazzar knew of what happened to King Nebuchadnezzar, and there is a great chance that he also watched this humiliation firsthand.⁴

Belshazzar didn't humble his heart before God but instead exalted himself over God, if to challenge Him. Belshazzar's act of bringing in the vessels from the temple of God was an egregious, blasphemous act against the Lord. He not only disrespected God by defiling the vessels with his personal use, he also praised and worshiped his false gods made of gold, bronze, iron, wood, and stone while he did so.

Before Daniel made known the interpretation of the writing on the wall, he made known the greatness of his God, who sat high above King Nebuchadnezzar and King Belshazzar. In the hand of God was the very breath that gave Belshazzar life. In the hand of God was the providence that brought Belshazzar to his current position. Belshazzar should have known this from all that happened to Nebuchadnezzar, but he refused to honor the sovereign Lord. Instead, he placed himself above the true God and worshiped created things rather than the Creator and Sustainer of all.

We look at stories like this and think to ourselves that Belshazzar was such a fool. Yet we make the same mistakes every single

day. However we may choose to sin, our sin is an attempt to place ourselves above God as the ones who know best for our lives, and in our sin, we worship and serve created things rather than the Creator of all things. The only difference between us and Belshazzar is Jesus, if we have placed our faith in Him. Jesus came not to condemn but to save (John 3:17). That doesn't mean God won't humble us, but in our humbling, the purpose is that we would surrender once again to the lordship of Christ.

VERSE 24 / God sent the hand that wrote on the wall both to show His might before Belshazzar and his one thousand nobles and other guests and to proclaim the message of His judgment to them. His judgment was final, and there was nothing that anyone could do to remove the sting of God's wrath from the nation. Belshazzar exalted himself over God, and God's response was swift and decisive. He displayed His might in an unusual way but one that made it clear He was acting. And in God's revelation of Himself to Belshazzar and his house guests, even though they didn't understand the message, He caused fear and panic to come over them all.

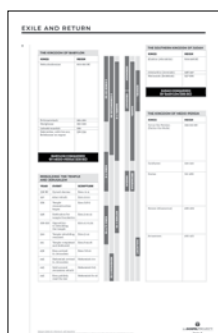
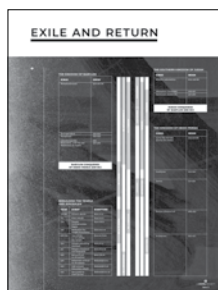
God is holy, which means that He is unique and separate from all that He has created, both in the sense of His nature and His morality. Even though Belshazzar was clearly not a follower of God, that didn't change the standard of living to which he was called. All people are made in God's image, so all people are called to reflect the image of God in the way they live. But because we are all sinful, we don't have the ability to live up to God's standard of holiness on our own. And even if we think of ourselves as pretty good people by our own standards, when placed next to the holiness of God, we don't have a leg to stand on.

Sin is not just an action, it's also a condition. The condition of sin led to Belshazzar's foolish, prideful actions and God's subsequent judgment on him and the nation of Babylon as a whole.

POINT 3

THE LORD JUDGES THOSE WHO ARE FOUND TO BE DEFICIENT (DAN. 5:25-30).

NOTES



THE MEDES AND PERSIANS

Originally located in the area south of the Caspian Sea, these peoples were allies with the Babylonians until they wanted to extend their own empire. In the sovereignty of God, they were used to conquer Babylon (Jer. 51:11). The Medo-Persian Empire was described in Daniel's visions as the silver chest and arms of a statue (Dan. 2:32) and as a beast like a bear (Dan. 7:5). Being sympathetic toward their conquered lands in letting them keep their culture, God used them to allow the Israelites to return to their land and rebuild the temple.

25 “This is the writing that was inscribed: Mene, Mene, Tekel, and Parsin. **26** This is the interpretation of the message: ‘Mene’ means that God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end. **27** ‘Tekel’ means that you have been weighed on the balance and found deficient. **28** ‘Peres’ means that your kingdom has been divided and given to the Medes and Persians.” **29** Then Belshazzar gave an order, and they clothed Daniel in purple, placed a gold chain around his neck, and issued a proclamation concerning him that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom. **30** That very night Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans was killed.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Daniel 5:25-30** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 25-28** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Belshazzar’s days were numbered because he didn’t **measure** up to God’s standard of holiness, as none of us do apart from the **saving** work of Christ.

DISCUSS: How should our own deficiency apart from Christ affect the way we see the sin of the people around us? (cause our hearts to be broken more; be humble before God and others; remind us of the urgency to share the gospel; help us to see that the world is broken and God wants to restore it)

EXPLAIN: Pass out copies of **PACK ITEM 4: EXILE AND RETURN**. Note the transition from the Babylonian Empire to the Medo-Persian Empire on **PACK ITEMS 3 AND 4: EXILE AND RETURN (POSTER AND HANDOUT)** as you use the **VERSES 29-30** commentary to emphasize the following idea (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

God desires that all people and **nations** come to Him in faith before it’s too late. In that respect, we, Jesus’s **ambassadors**, have much work to do.

COMMENTARY

VERSES 25-28 / After Daniel's rebuke of King Belshazzar, he turned his attention to the words written on the walls of the throne room next to the lampstand for all to see. The words read "**Mene, Mene, Tekel, and Parsin,**" and each one pointed to the end of the Babylonian Empire.

- "Mene" meant "**numbered.**" God had numbered the days of the Babylonian Empire and Belshazzar's reign in particular, and the days of this mighty empire had come to an end. As in most cases in the Bible, the fact that the word "Mene" was written twice was intended for emphasis. In this case, the emphasis implied that the time was fixed. There was no repentance in the heart of Belshazzar, so there would be no relenting from the judgment God had made on the kingdom.
- "Tekel" meant "**weighed.**" God had weighed and measured the holiness of Belshazzar next to His holy standard and Belshazzar was found to be deficient.
- "Parsin," or "Peres" (same root word in Hebrew), meant "**divided.**" The Babylonian Empire would now be removed from Belshazzar and given to the Medes and the Persians.

Of the words written on the wall, the one that sticks out most is "Tekel." "Mene" was repeated twice to emphasize that God wouldn't change His mind, but the word "Tekel" shed light on the reason Belshazzar's days were numbered and why the kingdom was being ripped from him. Belshazzar was weighed and found lacking. He didn't measure up to God's standard of holiness, and he received the judgment that he deserved for his actions.

When we read narratives like this in the Bible, they grab our attention because they are stark reminders of the fact that none of us measures up to God's standard. Passages like this one remind us that we really do deserve God's wrath. But these stories should also point us to the cross. If God's judgment of us is based on how we

measure up, we'd never make it into His kingdom. But if God's judgment is based on how Jesus measures up in our place, as He has promised for those who believe, then we have all we need to be ushered into God's eternal kingdom, where sin will no longer exist. The days that we have on earth are fixed. There is a defined period of time from our birth to our death or Jesus's return, but none of us knows its length. If we want to be judged and found holy, not deficient, then we must place our faith and trust in the finished work of Jesus now.

VERSES 29-30 / No doubt, Belshazzar hoped for a more favorable interpretation of what was written on his wall. Especially with Darius sitting at his gate waiting to pounce and destroy what was left of the Babylonian Empire. Nonetheless, he followed through with giving the reward that he had promised to Daniel.

But one thing Belshazzar didn't do was acknowledge God's rule over the earth. He didn't repent of his sin or even acknowledge it. He just kept his word to Daniel. His rewards ultimately didn't matter, though, for that night he died and the kingdom was given to the Medes and the Persians. This story starts with an over-the-top party and ends with a toppled-over kingdom. God's judgment of both Belshazzar and Babylon was swift and decisive.

But God loves everyone and desires that no one would perish and be separated from Him (2 Pet. 3:9). His desire is that everyone would surrender their lives to Him and call on the name of Jesus.

Like how the handwriting on the wall was sobering for Belshazzar, this passage should be a sobering reminder for us that there are many people in this world, both near and far, who haven't turned from their sin and don't know the saving work of Jesus. That reality should motivate us to live the way we were made to live and call others to do the same through sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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.

NOTES

HEAD:

The Bible communicates clearly that God desires that no one be subject to His wrath (2 Pet. 3:9). But the Bible is also clear that God hates sin and will not allow the guilty to go unpunished (Ex. 34:7). God stands against the proud, those who refuse to acknowledge His lordship, and He will humble them sooner or later. So God calls us to humble ourselves before Him by surrendering our lives to Him through faith in Jesus Christ because He cares for us (1 Pet. 5:5-7).

How does today's story inform the way you see God and His response to sin and foolish pride?

HEART:

God's verdict over Belshazzar's life was that it didn't measure up to His holy standard. Belshazzar was found guilty of his sin, and his sentence was death, which was carried out that very night. The sentence that Belshazzar received for his sin is the same one that we deserve. We're all guilty of sin and deserve to be separated from God. But God placed our guilty verdict on His Son, Jesus, who carried in His body the sentence for our guilt in our place on the cross. Because of this, we are now free to live and worship the One we were created to worship.

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:

Belshazzar's story is sad, but it is the story of everyone in our world who has yet to surrender to Christ. God's desire is to use you the same way He used Daniel in this story. He wants to use you to declare the message that no one measures up to God's standard—but the message doesn't stop there. God has sent His Son to die for the world, that all people everywhere might be saved. And now He's sending you to the world to tell others what Jesus has done.

How will you graciously confront the pride of others this week with the gospel of Jesus Christ?

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."⁵

—Zac Poonen

POINT 1: THE LORD CONFRONTS THOSE WHO PROFANE THAT WHICH IS HOLY (DAN. 5:1-8).

+ COMMENTARY

“The human defiance is quite clear, but you may wonder where the divine opportunity appears. Precisely here, at the end of verse 9! God has frightened Belshazzar; religion has failed him; he is reduced to a shivering, sniffling mess with no supports whatever. He is therefore on the edge of the abyss of hope, is he not? He is the object of God’s terror, but in one sense it is a kind terror. God does Belshazzar the favour of leaving him without any recourse, in utter helplessness—and hence with a huge opportunity. Whenever God brings a man to the end of himself, smashing all his props and wasting his idols, it is a favourable moment indeed. If he will but see it.”⁶

+ ILLUSTRATION

In a sermon, Charles Spurgeon recalled the following story:

You may have heard the story of the lady who advertised for a coachman and was waited on by three candidates for the situation. She put to the first one this question: “I want a really good coachman to drive my pair of horses. Therefore, I ask you, how near can you drive to danger and still be safe?” “Well,” he said, “I could drive very near indeed. I could go within a foot of a precipice without fear of any accident so long as I held the reins.” She dismissed him with the remark that he would not do.

To the next one who came she put the same question, “How near could you drive to danger?” Being determined to get the place, he said, “I could drive within a hair’s breadth, and yet skillfully avoid any mishap.” “You will not do,” said she.

When the third one came in, his mind was cast in another mold, so on the question being put to him, “How near could you drive to danger?” he said, “Madam, I never tried. It has always been a rule with me to drive as far from danger as I possibly can.” The lady engaged him at once.

In like manner, I believe that the man who is careful to run no risks and to refrain from all equivocal conduct, having the fear of God in his heart, is most to be relied on.⁷

EXTRA

At the very beginning of Daniel 5, Belshazzar showed that he had a pattern of playing things close to danger. In this story, he not only “plays a dangerous game,” he plays that game, daring the God of the universe to do something about it. And God responded quickly by making Himself known in front of Belshazzar and all of his house guests.

POINT 2: THE LORD REBUKES THOSE WHO EXALT THEMSELVES INSTEAD OF HIM (DAN. 5:22-24).

+ **COMMENTARY**

“How would Belshazzar have been aware of Nebuchadnezzar’s humiliation? Certainly the story would have been known, but evidence exists that indicates that Belshazzar may have seen these events firsthand. Belshazzar served as chief officer during the administration of King Neriglissar in 560 B.C. according to Babylonian historical texts. This means that the king was old enough to fill a high position in government only two years after Nebuchadnezzar’s death (562 B.C.) . . . This made Belshazzar’s blasphemy against Israel’s God even more inexcusable. Instead of glorifying Yahweh, he purposely defied him (‘set yourself up against the Lord of heaven’) by desecrating his holy things in using them to praise his idols (v. 23). By committing this act of sacrilege, Belshazzar had actually issued a challenge to ‘the Lord of heaven.’”⁸

+ **ILLUSTRATION**

“We’ve all heard the phrase, ‘The bigger they are, the harder they fall,’ at some point in our lifetime. This statement reigns so true really no matter what it is someone is known for. If you question the claim, ask flamboyant automobile entrepreneur John DeLorean, who left the corporate nest at General Motors to start his own automobile manufacturing company in Northern Ireland. The dream burned out, while debts flared. His company went into receivership. DeLorean was also indicted on alleged drug trafficking but was acquitted.

Ask Jake Butcher, another bright entrepreneur, a banker who enjoyed living in the fast lane. Butcher worked for years to bring the World’s Fair to Knoxville, Tennessee. He stood by President Reagan as he formally opened the Fair in 1982. Subsequently, Butcher flew to Louisville in his private jet to attend the Kentucky Derby with his friend, Governor John Y. Brown. On February 14, 1983, much to the amazement of the people of Knoxville and the nation, Butcher’s United American Bank was declared insolvent by the State Banking Commissioner and closed. The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation sold it to a Memphis holding company, First Tennessee National Corporation, which opened it the following day. Butcher has since been sentenced to a federal prison term for bank fraud.

These dramatic reversals emphasize the truth of Solomon’s warning: ‘Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall’ (Prov. 16:18). Success is a moving target!”⁹

In today’s story, Belshazzar and the mighty kingdom of Babylon are no different. Belshazzar’s fall from the top was hard and swift. He never acknowledged that God reigned above all. Even worse, he defiled the vessels from God’s temple while he worshiped his gods made from human hands.

POINT 3: THE LORD JUDGES THOSE WHO ARE FOUND TO BE DEFICIENT (DAN. 5:25-30).

+ COMMENTARY

“Verses 24–28 need further attention if we are to understand what had been written on the wall. The writing on the wall was inscribed in Aramaic as ‘MENE, MENE, TEKEL, and PARSIN’ (5:26). There would have been no vowel markings, and the letters would have run consecutively. Daniel’s first step is to rightly separate the letters into the appropriate word divisions. This yields four words to the inscription that reads, ‘numbered, numbered, weighed, divided.’ Daniel then provides the devastating interpretation in verses 26–28:

God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end . . . You have been weighed on the balance and found deficient . . . Your kingdom has been divided and given to the Medes and Persians.”¹⁰

+ ILLUSTRATION

“After a three-month summer recess, on October 3, 1994, the Supreme Court of the United States opened its 1994–95 term. According to the New York Times News Service, the court’s legal business for that first day could be summed up with one word: no. The court announced it had refused to hear more than 1,600 cases. The names and docket numbers of the rejected appeals covered sixty-eight typewritten pages. For those cases, that was the last court of appeal, the final word.

There’s something terribly final about judgment. The Supreme Court says no, and that’s it. No appeals. No arguments. The books are sealed, and the decision is final.

On the great day of judgment there will also be a terrible crescendo of no’s. ‘No, you cannot enter my kingdom.’ And the doors will be shut forever. No appeal. No time to change one’s mind. Those who have rejected Jesus Christ will have forever lost their opportunity for eternal life.”¹¹

References

1. Kenneth O. Gangel, *Daniel*, Holman Old Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2001) [Logos].
2. Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel*, vol. 18, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2003), 151.
3. Bryan Chapell, *The Gospel According to Daniel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014) [eBook].
4. Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel*, vol. 18, *The New American Commentary*, 163.
5. Zac Poonen, *Living as Jesus Lived* (Bangalore, India: Christian Fellowship Church, 1977) [eBook].
6. Dale Ralph Davis, *The Message of Daniel: His Kingdom Cannot Fail*, eds. Alec Motyer and Derek Tidball, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Nottingham, England: IVP, 2013), 74-75.
7. C. H. Spurgeon, “A Mournful Defection,” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 50 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1904), 612.
8. Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel*, vol. 18, *The New American Commentary*, 163.
9. G. Curtis Jones, “Sin: The Harder They Fall,” in *1000 Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1986), 315-16.
10. Daniel L. Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Daniel*, *Christ-Centered Exposition* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2017) [Logos].
11. Craig Brian Larson, “Judgment” in *750 Engaging Illustrations: For Preachers, Teachers & Writers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 277.

GOD'S PRESENCE IN ALL PLACES

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. God is present to hear from His people (1 Kings 8:27-30).
2. God is present to care for His people (Ps. 33:13-19).
3. God is present to dwell with His people (Isa. 7:10-14).

Background Passages: 1 Kings 8–9; Psalm 33; Isaiah 7

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

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

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

God, who has no limits, is always with His people to hear from them and care for them. God's desire to be with His people has been made known to us in Christ Jesus, who came to earth to live among humanity and to suffer and die so that people can be in relationship with God forevermore.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

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.

GROUP TIME

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

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.

DISCUSS: When you think about the presence of God, what comes to mind? (the Word of God; worship; comfort; love; peace; joy; salvation; Jesus; the Holy Spirit; heaven; God making all things new)

TRANSITION: God is good. We see this characteristic of God in His promise to dwell with His people, first in the tabernacle, next in the temple, and then in the temple of our bodies and churches. From the promise of God to dwell with His people, there are so many realities that the people of God get to live in. One of those is the reality that God's presence ensures that He will hear us when we pray, most notably seen in His gracious forgiveness of our sin when we confess it and cry out to Him for salvation.

OPTIONAL QUESTION: How have you experienced the presence of God in your life? (wait for a group member to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion)

POINT 1

GOD IS PRESENT TO HEAR FROM HIS PEOPLE (1 KINGS 8:27-30).

27 But will God indeed live on earth? Even heaven, the highest heaven, cannot contain you, much less this temple I have built. **28** Listen to your servant's prayer and his petition, LORD my God, so that you may hear the cry and the prayer that your servant prays before you today, **29** so that your eyes may watch over this temple night and day, toward the place where you said, "My name will be there," and so that you may hear the prayer that your servant prays toward this place. **30** Hear the petition of your servant and your people Israel, which they pray toward this place. May you hear in your dwelling place in heaven. May you hear and forgive.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **1 Kings 8:27-30** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 27** commentary to explain the hope that the omnipresence of God gives us, especially in that it means He both sees and hears us (*the bold words fill in blanks in the Daily Discipleship Guide [DDG]*):

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 (Ps. 33:14; 139:7-10; Isa. 57:15; Jer. 23:23-24; Matt. 18:20). God's omnipresence is a deterrent for sin and a source of great comfort and **hope** for believers.

DISCUSS: What are some ways we experience the presence of God now that are mere reflections of what is to come? (through reading the Bible, prayer, and worship, we feel God's peace; by spending time with God's people, forgiving and serving others, we sense God's presence amidst and through His people; through faith in Jesus, we have received the Holy Spirit—God the Spirit—to dwell in us, but one day we will enter God's presence in fullness at Jesus's return)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 28-30** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

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 **hear** and **forgive** those who cry out in **Jesus's** name.

TRANSITION: God's presence to hear His people helps us to know that He forgives our sin because He cares for us in His presence. Caring for someone is difficult if you're far away. But because God is omnipresent, we know He is right here with us caring for our needs, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual.

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."¹

—Timothy George

COMMENTARY

VERSE 27 / First Kings 8 is the completion of arguably the most important thing that Solomon did during his reign as king of Israel—build God’s temple. This was going to be the permanent home for the ark of the covenant. The temple would come to represent the presence of God in a very special way for Israel and for the rest of the world. But Solomon began this part of his prayer with a very important rhetorical question: Is God really going to live in this temple on earth? What he said next is really important in being able to understand and answer the question. God’s presence can’t be contained by all of heaven, and God certainly wasn’t going to make His home in this comparatively small temple that Solomon had built. And yet, that’s exactly what God did.

Verse 27 points not only to the reality of Israel at the time but also to the future hope of the world. God is omnipresent, which means that He is present at all times and in all places. God isn’t limited to the constraints of time and space like we are. Nowhere can anyone hide from God (Ps. 139:7-12). God sees everything we do, which should help us to flee temptation and avoid sin. God’s omnipresence should also be a source of hope for believers as it means that He is always with us and He always hears us.

It is true that God can’t be contained in heaven or on earth. Yet God’s manifest presence can be seen in specific moments in time and space. And each Person of the triune God has manifested His presence to His people—for example, the Father in the burning bush (Ex. 3–4), the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2), and the Son in Jesus (John 1).

In the advent of Jesus, not only did the person and work of Christ mean that God dwelled on the earth, it also meant that He was contained in an earthly body. All the fullness of God dwelled in Jesus (Col. 1:19). This means that in the advent of Jesus, God was fully present with His people to save His people. Furthermore, through

the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, we’ve not only been saved from our sin but we’ve also become the very temple of God, and the Spirit of God dwells in us (1 Cor. 3:16).

Not only does verse 27 cause us to reckon with Jesus’s first coming, it also makes us consider His second coming. One day, Jesus is going to make His permanent dwelling place with humanity, and He is going to make all things new (Rev. 21:3-5). While Solomon’s temple was a place where God’s manifest presence dwelled, it was only a shade of what was to come in Jesus’s first and second comings.

VERSES 28-30 / The next part of Solomon’s prayer of dedication for the temple was an incredibly humble request for God not only to make His dwelling with His people but also to hear His people. And taking it a step further, Solomon asked God to **“forgive”** His people of their sin when they prayed toward the temple. The temple was beautifully and intricately designed, but by itself, it wasn’t special. What made the temple special was the fact that God said His name would be there (Deut. 12:4-7). So in essence, God’s people, in praying in the direction of the temple, were praying in God’s name, by which all of God’s promises are sure.

These verses point us to two of the greatest realities that God’s people get to live in. One, God hears His people. Two, God forgives His people for their sin. Because God is omnipresent, in all places at all times, His people can rest assured that He hears them. And because God has placed the sin of His people on His Son, Jesus Christ, they can rest assured that God has forgiven them of their sin.

God loved us so much that He sacrificed greatly to save us. The Father sent the Son to earth in the form of a man that He might willingly die the death that all sinful human beings deserve to die. That is a God who can be trusted and who is also worth following.

POINT 2

GOD IS PRESENT TO CARE FOR HIS PEOPLE

(Ps. 33:13-19).

13 The LORD looks down from heaven; he observes everyone. **14** He gazes on all the inhabitants of the earth from his dwelling place. **15** He forms the hearts of them all; he considers all their works. **16** A king is not saved by a large army; a warrior will not be rescued by great strength. **17** The horse is a false hope for safety; it provides no escape by its great power. **18** But look, the LORD keeps his eye on those who fear him—those who depend on his faithful love **19** to rescue them from death and to keep them alive in famine.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Psalm 33:13-19** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 13-17** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Because God is omnipresent, He **sees** everyone and everything, including our **useless** attempts to save ourselves by our own merit.

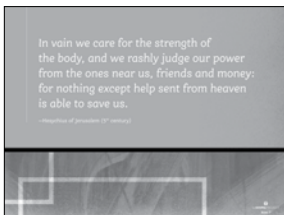
DISCUSS: Read the quote on **PACK ITEM 7: HELP FROM HEAVEN**, and then ask: **How do we sometimes reveal that we think we can save ourselves by our own merit?** (we try to do good things as a checklist of our spirituality; we judge others, thinking we're above judgment; we're prideful about our service to God and others)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 18-19** commentary to emphasize the following idea (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

God keeps **watch** over those who **fear** and trust Him to save us from **death** because He cares for us.

TRANSITION: We are completely dependent on God. But God both hears us and forgives our sin. God's promised listening and forgiveness find their fulfillment ultimately in His promise to send a Savior into the world to save us from our sin.

NOTES



COMMENTARY

VERSES 13-17 / Psalm 33 is an incredible psalm about the praiseworthiness of God as the Creator and Sustainer of all things. Throughout this psalm, we see God’s faithfulness and love for His people—how He is trustworthy and His love is unfailing (v. 4), how His plans are sure (v. 11), and how He has chosen a people (v. 12).

In verses 13-15, the repetition of the word **“all”** is a reference to the omnipresence of God. As we discussed in the previous point, the omnipresence of God refers to His presence in all times and all places simultaneously. These verses highlight the truth that even though God exists outside of time and space, He is also present with us where we are now. God is enthroned above all, and He sees all of humankind and He sees all the works of humanity.

Verse 15 says that God **“considers all their works.”** This is important because it shows us that God isn’t just enthroned above us watching us. No, God is watching and judging. He is judging righteously and fairly (Ps. 98:9). God judges all people based on the same standard—His holiness. Unfortunately, none of us has the ability to meet that standard, and God is keenly aware of that because He not only knows what’s in our hearts, but He also knit our hearts together. God judges because He cares about His holiness and about His people.

As the Lord looks at our works and deeds, He sees how we sometimes think we can care for ourselves on our own, even save ourselves from all harm and consequences by trusting in our mortal bodies. But verses 16-17 beg the question: Can you truly trust in your own might and power? Leaders with their armies can’t save. Warriors with all their strength can’t deliver. There is no hope in human effort for safety because reliance on human power and effort is insufficient for salvation. The words **“large”** and **“great”** in these verses ironically emphasize the weakness of human effort and the fact that even the greatest person is an ant compared to God.

VERSES 18-19 / Verses 16-17 in isolation from the rest of the psalm, or even the rest of Scripture, would spell doom for all humankind. We are helpless and sometimes we don’t even know it. But these verses set up what we need to see in verses 18-19, where salvation can only be found in trusting God, a salvation that is only possible because of the promise of His Son, Jesus.

Since God sees all and He judges the hearts of all people—and remember, none of us has the ability to save ourselves, especially from God’s judgment—then what is the hope for human beings? The hope for humanity is that God gives special attention to those who fear Him. Yes, He sees all, but those who fear Him are His people, and He acts on their behalf. The word **“fear”** in verse 18 doesn’t mean terror. In the context of verses 13-19, it means an attitude of dependence that leads to trust. The attitude of dependence and the action of trust leads to what we see in verse 19: rescue and provision, in other words, salvation.

On this side of the cross, the fear and trust that God calls for is ultimately in Jesus Christ. Psalm 33:18-19 points to the coming Messiah, who is the Son of God.

One day, the Son would take on the form of a man and do what human beings, in all their strength, could never do for themselves. He would lay down His perfect life in death on the cross to save humankind from sin and death because He truly cares for His people. But only those who trust in Jesus for salvation, with an attitude of dependence that leads to trust, will be saved. Jesus’s disciples loved their Teacher and marveled in fear at His person and power. And through His resurrection from the dead, they knew without a shadow of a doubt that He cared for them and purchased their salvation that could never be lost.

One day, Jesus will come again and judge all people by His holy standard. Only those who trust in Him as Savior and King will stand and be delivered from death.

POINT 3

GOD IS PRESENT TO DWELL WITH HIS PEOPLE (ISA. 7:10-14).

10 Then the LORD spoke again to Ahaz: **11** “Ask for a sign from the LORD your God—it can be as deep as Sheol or as high as heaven.” **12** But Ahaz replied, “I will not ask. I will not test the LORD.” **13** Isaiah said, “Listen, house of David! Is it not enough for you to try the patience of men? Will you also try the patience of my God? **14** Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign: See, the virgin will conceive, have a son, and name him Immanuel.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Isaiah 7:10-14** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 10-12** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Ahaz’s refusal to trust God wasn’t going to stop God from fulfilling His **promise** to provide a Savior through the line of **David**.

DISCUSS: What are some reasons we might find it difficult to trust God? (life experience clouds our judgment; we can’t see the outcome like God can; we’re sinners who like to trust in our own strength)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 13-14** commentary to emphasize the following idea (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Isaiah’s prophecy reveals God’s promise to be **faithful** to save and to be with His people by providing a Savior, **Immanuel**, “God with us.”

DISCUSS: How should understanding that God sent His Son as our Savior to save and be with us affect our view of God? (humble us to more submission; help us feel God’s love; be thankful for His sacrifice; worship God for being God)

NOTES

KING AHAZ

A wicked king of Judah who practiced child sacrifice and idol worship. He became king at the age of 20 (2 Kings 16:1-4) and did not walk in the ways of the Lord. When confronted with the threat of Assyria, Rezin of Aram/Syria made a treaty with Pekah of Israel and wanted Ahaz to join them. He refused and they waged war on Judah. Ahaz then sought an alliance with Assyria instead of listening to Isaiah and going to the Lord. He even gave gold and silver from God’s temple as tribute to Assyria (2 Kings 16:7-8).

TESTING GOD

Ahaz tried to use God’s Word to disobey Him, mentioning the law from Moses that you should not test God, “as you tested him at Massah” (Deut. 6:16). At Massah (meaning “test”), the Israelites complained about not having water, testing the Lord as if He weren’t with them after He led them out of Egypt. But in God’s grace, He allowed them to have water by Moses striking the rock at Horeb (Ex. 17:1-7).

COMMENTARY

VERSES 10-12 / The entirety of Isaiah 7 is almost like an illustration of what we just saw in Psalm 33. God really is present to dwell with His people even when His people refuse to trust in Him, not in spite of His people's lack of trust but because God cares about His promises.

In Isaiah 7, King Ahaz of Judah had enemies knocking at his door wanting to fight: Rezin from Aram/Syria and Pekah from Israel (7:1). This seemed like an impossible situation to endure, somewhat similar to what we read a few sessions ago with Daniel and his three friends. But the difference between Ahaz and Daniel with his friends was that Ahaz didn't have the same resolve that they did, which is terrifying, seeing as he was king of Judah. But God had already promised to protect Ahaz if he would simply put his trust in the Lord (Isa. 7:7-9).

To encourage Ahaz, even though he was a faithless king, God commanded Ahaz to ask for a sign that God was powerful and faithful enough to contend for His people. And in this command, God gave Ahaz a blank check to ask for whatever sign he wanted. Ahaz, however, refused by presenting a false humility before God's prophet.² It is true that God commanded His people not to put Him to the test (Deut. 6:16), but here, God was not only offering to give Ahaz a sign, He was commanding him to ask for one.

Ahaz was depending on his own feeble strength to defend Judah, as opposed to depending on God. But because of God's goodness, the Lord tried to help Ahaz in strengthening his faith by offering to give him a sign. The refusal of that gift was too much for Isaiah and for God.

We can take this as a warning for ourselves not to depend on our own strength instead of God's. And as we're about to see in verse 13, as Isaiah rebuked Ahaz, God will do what He sets out to do, but circumstances will always be better if we're with Him, rather than not.

VERSES 13-14 / In verse 13, Isaiah rebuked Ahaz, but not just because of Ahaz's false religious attitude in not doing what God had commanded him to do. This rebuke was offered because of Ahaz's lack of trust in God and his lack of willingness to even try to trust in God. Again, this resolve to do things in his own strength should have been terrifying for the people of Judah. Their God-appointed king in the line of David, who had been tasked with fighting on their behalf, was refusing to trust the God who held every part of the nation together.

Despite Ahaz's refusal to trust God, in verse 14, God told him through Isaiah that He would give him a sign anyway—the sign that a child would be born of a **“virgin.”** The Hebrew word for “virgin” here, in context, could mean virgin or young woman.³ This is important to note because this sign was more than likely initially fulfilled in Isaiah 8:1-10 through the normal birth of a son of Isaiah. But ultimately, this sign pointed to the miraculous virgin birth of Jesus. In Ahaz's day, God was promising to protect not only Judah but also its Davidic kingly line because God had promised to send a Savior through that same line (2 Sam. 7:16). In our day, we read this prophetic sign as a promise for the world: God has sent the Savior of the world in the line of David—the Son of God, Jesus, Immanuel, God forever with us.

The significance of this prophecy and its fulfillment is that it points to the nature of our Savior. Jesus being born of a virgin, conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, means that Jesus is both truly God and truly man. As both the Son of God and the Son of the virgin Mary, Jesus would be able to live the life we were supposed to live, die the death we should have died, and then rise from the grave in anticipation of our future glorification. In the birth of Jesus, prophesied here in Isaiah 7:14, lies the hope of all humanity—a God who loves His people enough to die for them and who is raised to life to dwell with them forever.

MY RESPONSE



PACK ITEM 8: BECAME LIKE US: Hand out copies of this bookmark to help remind your group of the purpose for which the Son of God took on flesh to be “God with us.”

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:

There is nowhere that we can go and hide from God. God is everywhere. The omnipresence of God is a part of His character that both helps us to avoid sin and encourages us to pray, for He hears us. Knowing that God gives special attention to those who surrender their lives to Him gives us hope that He will forgive our sin, which He has through the life, death, burial, and resurrection of the promised Savior, Jesus Christ.

What are some ways the truth of God’s omnipresence should affect the way you live?

HEART:

God desires that we trust Him with all of ourselves for every part of our life. The reason God desires this for us is because He knows that we are completely and totally dependent on Him for everything. The good news is that God provides all that we need, both to sustain our lives now and to usher us into the kingdom of His Son. These truths should give us a great appreciation for God’s work through Jesus and give us a greater sense of excitement for what He will do in the future.

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:

God’s promise of sending a Savior into the world through a virgin is a promise that has been fulfilled. That’s part of the good news of the gospel. Jesus has come into the world and lived up to God’s standard of holiness on our behalf. But as the term “good news” suggests, this truth is meant to be shared. God’s desire for the gospel is that it would be shared with every tribe, nation, and tongue (1 John 2:2; Rev. 7:9). And His desire for His people is that they are the ones who make this happen.

How will you use the Christmas season celebrating “God with us” to help you share the gospel of Jesus with someone this week?

NOTES

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.”⁴

—Charles Spurgeon
(1834-1892)

POINT 1: GOD IS PRESENT TO HEAR FROM HIS PEOPLE

(1 KINGS 8:27-30).

+ COMMENTARY

“On this side of the cross, we have no temple; we have something better, namely, Jesus. Through Him we can pray anytime, anywhere, as Jesus told the woman at the well (John 4:21–24). And we know God hears the prayers of His people. ‘Call to Me and I will answer you’ (Jer 33:3; cf. Ps 91:15; Jer 29:12). What is more, we have a better Mediator than Solomon. Jesus Christ our King is our eternal Intercessor (Rom 8:34; Heb 7:25), and the Holy Spirit dwells within us, allowing us to commune with God (Eph 2:18). Pour out your heart to this transcendent and immanent God.”⁵

POINT 3: GOD IS PRESENT TO DWELL WITH HIS PEOPLE

(ISA. 7:10-14).

+ COMMENTARY

“The context indicates that the preliminary fulfillment of this sign must have taken place within a few years of its utterance—the time between a child’s conception and his knowing right from wrong (vv. 15–16), traditionally at age twelve. The Hebrew word translated virgin means ‘young woman of marriageable age’ and often has the implication of virginity. Thus many scholars feel that the referent is a woman whom Isaiah would marry and, if so, then the birth is mentioned in 8:1–4. This may be the immediate fulfillment of this sign. But its ultimate and more exalted fulfillment is noted in Mt 1:23 as it cites the more specific Greek word found in the Septuagint, *parthenos*, which means ‘virgin.’ Immanuel means ‘God With Us.’”⁶

References

1. Timothy George, “The Nature of God: Being, Attributes, and Acts,” in *A Theology for the Church*, rev. ed., ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2014), 199.
2. Andrew M. Davis, *Exalting Jesus in Isaiah*, Christ-Centered Exposition (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2017) [Logos].
3. Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 1–39*, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 213.
4. C. H. Spurgeon, “God with Us,” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 21 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1876), 713.
5. Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Kings*, Christ-Centered Exposition (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2015), 50.
6. Tremper Longman III, “Isaiah,” in *CSB Study Bible*, eds. Edwin A. Blum and Trevis Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1053.

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 (Ex. 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.

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 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 (Zech. 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.¹

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

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

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 (Zech. 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 worshiping Him our priority. And God desires to do a restoration project in the lives of His children today!

1. William Cowper, “There Is a Fountain,” in Baptist Hymnal (Nashville, TN: Lifeway Worship, 2008), 224.



A PEOPLE RETURNED

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. The Lord moved a leader to fulfill His word (Ezra 1:1-4).
2. The Lord roused the people to rebuild His house (Ezra 1:5-11).
3. The Lord restored the families to their homes (Ezra 2:1-2).

Background Passage: Ezra 1-2

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

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

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

God kept His promise to return His people from exile in Babylon and restore their freedom to worship Him. Since Adam and Eve's first sin, all humans have been exiled from God and are in need of deliverance. Jesus came to end this exile, bring His people home, and restore our freedom to worship God.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

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.

GROUP TIME

NOTES



INTRODUCTION

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 toward 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.

INSTRUCT: Have group members recall occasions when they or family members were away for extended periods of time and then came back home again, or maybe a time when they went back to their childhood home after being away for months or years. Have them describe what it was like to come home by engaging their senses with the following questions.

DISCUSS: **What sounds did you notice when you returned home? What smells were different? What things did you see that you hadn't noticed before?** (wait for a group member to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion)

TRANSITION: God's people had been away from their homeland in exile for decades. During the Babylonian siege of 586 BC, the city of Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed. So when the people returned to the land of promise, the sights, smells, and sounds would have been jarring for them—the walls were broken, the temple burned, and the fields barren. It would take great motivation to return back to their homeland and rebuild what had been ruined.



Listen to session-by-session training every week on Ministry Grid, Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or Lifeway's Digital Pass: ministrygrid.com/gospelproject | gospelproject.com/leader-training.

POINT 1

THE LORD MOVED A LEADER TO FULFILL HIS WORD (EZRA 1:1-4).

1 In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken through Jeremiah, the LORD roused the spirit of King Cyrus to issue a proclamation throughout his entire kingdom and to put it in writing: **2** This is what King Cyrus of Persia says: “The LORD, the God of the heavens, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and has appointed me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. **3** Any of his people among you, may his God be with him, and may he go to Jerusalem in Judah and build the house of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem. **4** Let every survivor, wherever he resides, be assisted by the men of that region with silver, gold, goods, and livestock, along with a freewill offering for the house of God in Jerusalem.”

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Ezra 1:1-4** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 1** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Through Cyrus, God stayed true to His **covenants**, fulfilling His word in bringing the **people** of Israel back to their land.

DISCUSS: How should knowing the Lord fulfills His promises cause us to read His Word? (with eyes of faith, looking for how the Lord is bringing His promises to fulfillment; digging into the Scriptures and looking at various references to see how God keeps His promises in various ways; expectant to discover how the Lord is working.)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 2-4** commentary to emphasize the following idea (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Throughout **history**, including Cyrus's actions, God is sovereign over all, bringing about His **purposes** and **promises**.

DISCUSS: What difference should God's providence, His control of all things, make in how we view history? (history is not out of control but ordered and designed by God to bring about His good purposes for His glory and His people's good; we can trust the present and the future to a God who knows all and orchestrates the events of history; we should not fear the present nor future circumstances but entrust ourselves to the Lord)

TRANSITION: Just as the Lord could move the heart of an unbelieving leader, the Lord could rouse the hearts of His people so that they would be restored to worship Him rightly.

NOTES

THE PROPHET JEREMIAH

The son of a priest from Anathoth, Jeremiah served as a prophet to the Southern Kingdom of Judah from the reign of Josiah through the reign of Zedekiah, Judah's last king. He warned the Israelites of their idolatry and disregard of the Lord, but instead of repenting, they continued in sin, leading to their captivity. Yet Jeremiah also preached hope because God promised they would return to the land (Jer. 29:11; 30:8; 31:4; 33:6-9). He even bought land in Jerusalem to illustrate that promise (Jer. 32:6-25).

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.”¹

—A. W. Pink (1886-1952)

COMMENTARY

VERSE 1 / The book of Ezra looks back to God’s covenantal promises to Abraham in Genesis 12. God led Abraham to a new land where He would make this family into a great nation. Abraham believed God’s promises (Gen. 12:4; 15:6) and settled in the promised land, but his descendants were later driven into Egypt by a famine. They spent the next four hundred years in bondage until God delivered them through Moses. God had promised to make these descendants His own “possession” out of all the peoples and His “holy nation” if they obeyed His voice and kept the covenant He had given at Mount Sinai—encapsulated in the Ten Commandments (Ex. 19:5-6; 20).

But throughout the history of Abraham’s family, this nation did not obey the Lord’s voice. Judges and prophets would arise and call the people back to the Lord. But after centuries of disobedience and covenant-breaking, their enemies captured them and they became exiles, where they longed for the day when God would rebuild Jerusalem. This exile fulfilled the covenantal curses that Moses had laid out before the people in Leviticus 26:32-34 should they choose to abandon the Lord and His covenant.

Through the prophet Isaiah, the people knew one day a “Cyrus” would arise as a great political leader. He would disarm kings and be the Lord’s “anointed” and the Lord’s “shepherd” who would fulfill all of the Lord’s pleasure, resulting in Jerusalem’s rebuilding and the temple’s foundation being laid (Isa. 44:28–45:1). This action of the Lord, that He “**roused the spirit of King Cyrus,**” is where the book of Ezra begins.

The reference to “**the first year**” probably refers to the first year Cyrus had authority over Babylon and Judah in 539 BC as the king of Persia. His willingness to free exiles to return to the land is linked to the prophecy of Jeremiah. During his day, Jeremiah spoke of a time when Jerusalem would be rebuilt (Jer. 31:38) and when the people would return from captivity after seventy

years of exile (Jer. 25:11,12; 29:10). Ezra 1:1 and 2 Chronicles 36:22 help pinpoint the beginning of the seventy years from the first deportation of Jews, including Daniel (Dan. 1:2-4), from the land in 605 BC.

VERSES 2-4 / In a written letter to his kingdom, Cyrus proclaimed that the Lord, the God of the heavens had appointed him to build a house for the Lord in Jerusalem. Cyrus was known to have a pragmatic political approach to conquered lands. He sought peace in his kingdom by returning religious items stolen by the Babylonians to their original peoples; he rebuilt temples for the religious items; and he resettled people back into their own homelands.² Yet from the perspective of our passage, this was no mere act of pragmatism but a work of the hand of the Lord. Five times Cyrus’s decree mentioned God.

Cyrus called Him “**the LORD, the God of the heavens.**” While this does not indicate anything of Cyrus’s beliefs about the Lord, within the context of Ezra, it must be understood as an expression of God’s sovereign hand over all things, even over Cyrus, who had “**all the kingdoms of the earth.**”

Cyrus, in order to accomplish building the house of the Lord, permitted any of those who were the Lord’s people to return to Jerusalem. With this task, Cyrus expressed the desire that God’s presence would go with His people. For a Jewish reader, these words would have reminded them of the Lord’s promises to go with His people during the exodus, wilderness wanderings, and entrance into the land of promise (Ex. 34:9; Num. 14:14; Deut. 31:6). As the Lord was with them in the past, He continued to be with them now.

Finally, Cyrus decreed that every survivor’s neighbors in the land should support this work of reconstruction of the temple by giving of their resources (cf. Ezra 1:6). Just as God had brought Israel out of Egypt, He once again was bringing His people out of exile and back home.

POINT 2

THE LORD ROUSED THE PEOPLE TO REBUILD HIS HOUSE (EZRA 1:5-11).

NOTES

5 So the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, along with the priests and Levites—everyone whose spirit God had roused—prepared to go up and rebuild the LORD’s house in Jerusalem. **6** All their neighbors supported them with silver articles, gold, goods, livestock, and valuables, in addition to all that was given as a freewill offering. **7** King Cyrus also brought out the articles of the LORD’s house that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem and had placed in the house of his gods. **8** King Cyrus of Persia had them brought out under the supervision of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. **9** This was the inventory: 30 gold basins, 1,000 silver basins, 29 silver knives, **10** 30 gold bowls, 410 various silver bowls, and 1,000 other articles. **11** The gold and silver articles totaled 5,400. Sheshbazzar brought all of them when the exiles went up from Babylon to Jerusalem.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Ezra 1:5-11** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 5-6** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

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

EXPLAIN: Use **PACK ITEM 2: THE RETURN MAP** and the **VERSES 7-11** commentary to emphasize the following idea (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

The Lord roused the hearts of leaders and His people so that proper **worship** of Him could be **restored** and sustained.

DISCUSS: How should God’s care for the details of His worship move our hearts to worship Him better? (make sure our worship is in spirit and truth; make sure our worship is true and pleasing; make sure our worship is according to His Word and His ways)

TRANSITION: Since the Lord can rouse the hearts of leaders and people to do what is pleasing to Him, He can be trusted to redeem and restore His people.



COMMENTARY

VERSES 5-6 / While Cyrus had permitted any of God’s people to return to Jerusalem to build the house of the Lord (1:3), it was the Lord who roused and stirred the spirits of the people to go. What would cause the people to take up the opportunity to return to Jerusalem after it had been destroyed? Their receptivity could only be fueled by the promises of God to restore Israel. The spiritual encouragement to go suggests that the journey and task ahead would be challenging. Jerusalem and the temple would have to be rebuilt from scratch after the Babylonian siege and destruction (see 2 Chron. 36:15-21).

Included among the returnees were key leaders from the Southern Kingdom of Judah—the family heads from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. These people had been taken by Nebuchadnezzar back to Babylon. Along with these family heads were the priests and the Levites. These were the religious leaders of Israel and necessary for proper worship within the temple.

Just as the first exodus led God’s people out of bondage and slavery so that they might build a dwelling place for God, so the people came out of exile in Babylon and returned to the land in order to rebuild the temple. And just as the people experienced gifts from their neighbors at the first exodus (Ex. 3:21-22; 11:2; 12:35-36), so these returning exiles experienced the favor of their neighbors, receiving gold, silver, goods, valuables, and livestock for the journey and the work. These items were given to assist in the reconstruction of the temple. These connections with the first exodus suggest that Ezra 1 should be viewed as a second exodus, one that Isaiah was looking forward to (cf. Isa. 43:19-21; 48:21; 51:9-11; 52:11-12).³ While Isaiah foretold of an exodus to come, this exodus from Babylon did not meet all of the expectations that Isaiah had seen coming. There would be yet another and greater exodus to come—one that would lead people out of sin and death and into eternal life.

VERSES 7-11 / In verse 7, there is a stark contrast between Cyrus’s actions and Nebuchadnezzar’s. The king of Babylon **“had taken”** the vessels from the Lord’s house; now the king of Persia **“brought out”** the articles from the temple to give them back to the returning exiles. Babylonians took the idols of defeated peoples and placed them in their temple, attempting to show how the gods of the nations were subservient to the gods of the Babylonians. Since Israel had no idols, temple artifacts and furniture were taken instead.⁴ But the Lord roused the spirit of Cyrus, causing the articles of the house of the Lord to be brought back. Verse 8 names Mithredath as the treasurer who returned the items from Cyrus to Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah. In Ezra 5:14, Sheshbazzar is called the governor of Judah, appointed by Cyrus.

What was returned for the temple is listed in verses 9-10. While the number of items listed in these verses totals 2,499, verse 11 says that the total number of items returned was 5,400. We may assume that the list in verses 9-10 was not exhaustive. There is also some uncertainty as to what the “29 silver knives” refers to. This obscure Persian word should not cause us confusion. Regardless of the nature of the items listed, verse 8 makes it clear that the exact items confiscated by Nebuchadnezzar were counted out and returned to Sheshbazzar. These articles were then taken back to Jerusalem by the returning exiles in preparation for the rebuilding of the house of the Lord.

These articles held deep significance for the exiles from Judah, reminding them of the Lord’s presence and dwelling place among them. But these weren’t idols for worship. The Lord directed the return of these items. The Lord stirred the heart of Cyrus, and the Lord stirred the hearts of His people. While nations may rise up and plot against the Lord and His people, His sovereign hand will rule history, and He will remain faithful to His covenant promises made so long ago.

POINT 3

THE LORD RESTORED THE FAMILIES TO THEIR HOMES (EZRA 2:1-2).

1 These now are the people of the province who came from those captive exiles King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had deported to Babylon. They returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town. **2** They came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, and Baanah.

READ: On account of some difficult names, read aloud **Ezra 2:1-2** yourself for this point.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 1** commentary to highlight that God keeps His promises and will continue to do so because He is unchanging (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

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**.

DISCUSS: How might God's unchanging nature encourage you during hard times? (because His love never changes, we can know He loves us no matter what; because His grace never changes, we know He will always forgive when we repent; because His goodness never changes, we can trust in His plans for us; because He always keeps His promises, we can know that what He says is true)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 2** commentary to emphasize the following idea (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

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

TRANSITION: Just as He kept His promise to His people never to leave them nor forsake them, we have confidence that the Lord will keep us and bring us home. We know that Christ has gone away to prepare a place for us (John 14:1-4), and His death and resurrection have secured the future for those who have put their faith in Him. This means that we can trust the Lord in our present circumstances and believe that He will lead us all the way home.

NOTES

NEHEMIAH AND MORDECAI

The "Nehemiah" mentioned in Ezra 2:2 is not the same Nehemiah who would later rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. And "Mordecai" is a different figure than the one mentioned in the book of Esther. As in our day, it was not uncommon for people to share the same name.⁵

COMMENTARY

VERSE 1 / While it might be tempting to skip over all the names listed in Ezra 2, this chapter begins with an important statement about those who came back from Babylon: the returnees came from those captive exiles that King Nebuchadnezzar had deported to Babylon. The Lord had promised through Jeremiah that His people would be preserved (see Jer. 24:6). Isaiah had foretold the day when a new exodus would happen under Cyrus's reign (see Isa. 44:28–45:1). And now, as promised, God's people were allowed to return home.

While the list in Ezra 2 describes the people who returned, it does not tell us when they returned. We know that there were several waves at various times when the people returned to Jerusalem in the early days of the Persian Empire. For this reason, 2:1 connects us back to 1:11—those associated with the province of Judah were the ones who went up from Babylon to Jerusalem. But 2:1 also looks forward to the names that are listed in the verses that follow.

The transition of so many people from Babylon to Judah is a reminder of the steadfast love of the Lord—He released the people who had been captive and gave them freedom. The purpose for these freed captives was to come back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple as Cyrus had decreed. First, they had received the articles from the temple (1:7). Now they would return to begin the task of rebuilding.

The language of **“the province”** refers to smaller administrative regions, of which there were 127 in the Persian Empire. These freed captives would be going to the administrative province “Beyond the River,” or “west of the Euphrates River”—the wider region that would have included Judah (see 6:6).⁶

VERSE 2 / The names listed here total eleven. A similar list in Nehemiah 7:7, with some variations, includes a twelfth name. These twelve names constituted the restored Israel, the restoration of the

former twelve tribes that had inherited the land under Joshua, demonstrating God's great and providential care to restore His people to their homeland.

At the head of the list is Zerubbabel, whose name meant “seed of Babylon.” He is mentioned in Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah. He was a descendant of David's royal line as the son of Shealtiel (Ezra 3:2,8; 5:2; Neh. 12:1) and a grandson of one of Judah's final kings before the final exile, Jehoiachin (1 Chron. 3:16-19). He is referred to in the lineage of Christ (Matt. 1:12), showing how he was a pivotal figure linking Judah's past with her future. Through his leading the people home in one of the initial returns, it becomes clear that the Lord was keeping His promise to His people so that a descendant of David would rule on the throne of Israel forever (2 Sam. 7:12ff). Zerubbabel would lead the people so that the temple could be rebuilt (see Ezra 3:2,8; 4:2-3; 5:1-2; 6:14) and they could resettle the land God had given them.

The second name in the list, Jeshua, is a variation of the name Joshua, recalling the one who led Israel into the promised land. Jeshua was from a line of priests (see Ezra 3:2,8,9; 4:4; 5:2; 10:18), and his ancestor Jozadak had also experienced exile under Nebuchadnezzar (see Ezra 5:2; 1 Chron. 6:15). His role as a high priest is referred to in Haggai 1:1,12,14, where his name is spelled “Joshua.”

While other names were significant, it is most important to note how these first two names point towards the resettlement of the land and the promised fulfillment of a seed that would come from Abraham's line and rule as a descendant of David. These two, with the other men, would form the reconstituted Israel and settle the land like in the days of Moses's successor Joshua. The line of kings would carry on, though there would be no throne in Judah, and the priesthood would be reconstituted. Both of these roles pointed forward to the coming of Jesus, both priest and king (Heb. 7–8).

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:

God always keeps His promises. Even when times are difficult and hard, God is working to bring about that which is good for His people and glorious for His name's sake. Hard times may come along, but the end of the story is filled with the hope of God's restoring work. The Lord took Israel in her trespasses and sins, purified her, and brought her back to the land. And the Lord can raise sinners dead in their trespasses and sins, bring them out of exile, and carry them all the way home to be with Him forever.

How does the Jewish return from exile give you hope that God is working out your salvation for your good and His glory?

HEART:

Because God keeps His promises to His people, having delivered them from exile and restored their items for temple worship, His people were enabled to worship the Lord. Just as Israel was to rebuild the temple and restore the proper worship of God after their exile, so we should remember our salvation in a way that moves our hearts to worship the Lord. God has brought us out of the exile of sin and death so that we might adore Him with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

What are some ways that you can praise God together with your group for His work of salvation in your life?

HANDS:

Because God has saved us from the exile of sin and death and brought us to worship Him, our adoration should show our love and thankfulness for God's mercy and grace to us. A life of worship will be displayed with thanksgiving and praise and should cause us to speak of the Lord's goodness to others around us.

Who will you talk to this week about God's goodness in saving you from sin and death through faith in Jesus?

NOTES

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."⁷

—James M. Hamilton Jr.

POINT 1: THE LORD MOVED A LEADER TO FULFILL HIS WORD (EZRA 1:1-4).

+ **COMMENTARY**

“The expressions in these verses, however, must not be viewed as Cyrus’s embrace of the covenant established by the Lord for his people. Instead, they should be read in light of the Cyrus Cylinder inscription (an ancient clay cylinder written to defend the claims of its king), which credits the primary Babylonian god, Marduk, with establishing Cyrus as ‘king over all the world.’ It also describes the Persian policy of restoring to temples the images (i.e., statues) of their gods previously taken to Babylon. Cyrus restores the gods of various peoples (not just Israel), thus emphasizing his own benevolence toward those gods and also his desire for those peoples’ prayers. In addition, he pronounces his generosity toward the people who dwell in cities over which he now rules. The proclamation of 1:2-4 is therefore politically expedient; Cyrus does for Judah what he does for other nations. In this case, however, the providence of the living God has moved his heart to act. The Lord raises up and deposes rulers for purposes about which such rulers may be oblivious. In this case, the Lord’s immediate purpose is to bring his homeless people home to rebuild his house (i.e., temple). But a deeper goal exists. In abandoning the covenant, God’s people had abandoned their priestly role (Ex. 19:5-6); by restoring them to Jerusalem to rebuild his temple, the Lord revives their priestly function in the world.”⁸

+ **ILLUSTRATION**

While Japan is a very developed country, even rural areas have been designed to maximize space. Crammed into every available space are little paddy fields for growing rice, scattered along the countryside.

In order to grow rice, a good supply of water is needed. Running around and through the grids of rice fields are channels with gates to control the flow of water. If the farmer needs to flood the field, the supply gate is lifted, allowing water to spread across the field until the desired amount is reached. And when the field needs to be drained, the farmer lifts a gate at another point in the field, allowing the water to flow out. The farmer is completely in charge of how the water flows in and out and throughout the fields.

The forces of world history often feel powerful. Superpowers, wars, and rumors of wars can cause us to grow deeply distressed as if nothing can control them. Economic forces change

markets beyond our control. Elections change the ruling party in power, even though we have a single vote. The flow of the supply chain of goods can run smoothly or be interrupted by events that no one could predict. Prices of goods rise and fall based on events and the availability of goods. But behind all of these events is the God of history. Our God reigns, is in control, and like the farmer who opens and closes the gates to let the water flow in the fields, God works throughout human history. He even used unbelievers to bring about the restoration of His people and the rebuilding of His temple.

POINT 2: THE LORD ROUSED THE PEOPLE TO REBUILD HIS HOUSE (EZRA 1:5-11).

+ **COMMENTARY**

“The opening chapter of Ezra offers a revealing insight into the way in which some exiles made sense of the rise of Cyrus and the extraordinary opportunity that arose for them to return to the land that was ‘promised’ (Jer. 29:10). Viewed through the eyes of faith, this opportunity is seen by the Jews as arising not because of Cyrus’s own pragmatism or opportunism, but because YHWH, their God, is God of not only the heavens but also the earth. Ezra 1 insists that, despite appearances to the contrary, the return from exile was YHWH’s idea and his doing, the gracious initiative of a God who is in the habit of remembering and redeeming his people. Evidence for God’s habit of redemption is found in Ezra’s identification of the exiles’ situation with that of their exodus ancestors, whom God returned to the land in fulfillment of the patriarchal promise. Indeed, just as the exodus narrative consciously invites remembrance of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, so too Ezra 1 evokes recollections of the God of the exodus who led their ancestors through the wilderness to the promised land. The mechanics and means of redemption are explained, not in economic, social, or political terms, but in spiritual ones—it is God’s spirit who stirs both the powers of this earth and his own people into action, and he does so for one purpose: so that worship of him may be restored.”⁹

+ **OPTIONAL TEACHING ACTIVITY**

Consider asking some people in the group who wear glasses to take their glasses off, or have some put on a pair of prescription lenses that are not their own or put on a pair of sunglasses in a dimly lit room. From across the room, hold up a faintly drawn picture and ask them to open their eyes and describe what they see. Then have them use their proper or corrected vision and answer you again.

This is what faith does to our perspective: it clarifies our understanding of what God is doing in the world. Though we might see the exact same situation as others, faith causes us to look with eyes of faith to see how God might be at work to accomplish His purposes.

This is the reason someone can read two different history books on the same subject and yet be surprised by how each one retells the same event or comes to very different conclusions. Though the people who were involved in the events may be the same and the facts be presented fairly, how history is interpreted is often shaped by the lens through which one looks at the world. God’s people have always put on the spectacles of faith so that they might not merely interpret history by what is seen but by what God has said He would do according to His Word.

POINT 3: THE LORD RESTORED THE FAMILIES TO THEIR HOMES (EZRA 2:1-2).

+ COMMENTARY

“This chapter, however uninviting it may seem, is a monument to God’s care and to Israel’s vitality. The thousands of homecomers are not lumped together, but (in characteristic biblical fashion) related to those local and family circles which humanize a society and orientate an individual. Such is God’s way, who ‘setteth the solitary in families’ (Ps. 68:8, AV, RV). And for the people’s part, their tenacious memory of places and relationships, still strong after two generations in exile, showed a fine refusal to be robbed of either their past or their future. So these were living portions of Israel, roots and all, for replanting.”¹⁰

+ COMMENTARY

“The opening words of Ezra’s list are identical to those what begin the parallel list in Nehemiah 7:6. This suggests that the list was probably drawn up after the exiles had settled back in their homeland and may include people who returned at various times. The returnees are described as the people of the province (2:1) because at this time Judah was merely an administrative unit of the Persian Empire . . . Zerubbabel and Joshua were the anointed leaders (Zech 4:11-14). Even though Joshua’s household had let God down, Joshua was the high priest (Zech 3:1-10). Zerubbabel was the governor of the province. He may have owed his position to his ancestry, for he was the son of Shealtiel, the son of the exiled King Jehoiachin (1 Chr 3:17; 2 Kgs 24:8-15).”¹¹

+ ILLUSTRATION

Consider having a cutting of a plant that could be rooted, or have a picture of a plant that has been cut and then rooted again for replanting. Discuss how the replanting of a cutting could take hold in its new setting and grow to become great and large like the plant from which it came. Consider the factors that it takes to re-root a plant: sunlight, good soil, some fertilizer, and some tender loving care.

Just as a plant can thrive when it is cut and re-rooted in the right situation, so the Lord had cut His people off not to cause them harm but to re-root His people back into the land. This planting would require them to be tenacious, courageous, and strong. But ultimately, it would be the Lord’s work. He would establish His people following the exile. Just as a plant re-grows as the same species it came from, so the Lord’s people would be replanted in the land as the chosen people of the Lord, kept for His purposes, to fulfill the promises that He had made to Abraham and to David.

References

1. Arthur W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God* (Swengel, PA: Bible Truth Depot, 1949), 25.
2. Mark Roberts and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, vol. 11, *The Preacher’s Commentary Series* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 42.
3. Leslie C. Allen and Timothy S. Laniak, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, *Understanding the Bible Commentary Series* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 19-20.
4. W. Brian Aucker, “Ezra–Nehemiah,” in *ESV Expository Commentary*, vol. 4, *Ezra–Job* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 33.
5. *Ibid.*, 40.
6. *Ibid.*, 38.
7. James M. Hamilton Jr., *Exalting Jesus in Ezra–Nehemiah*, *Christ-Centered Exposition* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2014) [Logos].
8. W. Brian Aucker, “Ezra–Nehemiah,” in *ESV Expository Commentary*, vol. 4, *Ezra–Job*, 30-31.
9. David J. Shepherd, “Commentary on Ezra,” in *Ezra and Nehemiah*, *The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 14.
10. Derek Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, vol. 12, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979), 39.
11. Augustine Pagolu, “Ezra,” in *South Asia Bible Commentary*, gen. ed. Brian Wintle (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 542.

A PEOPLE CLEANSED

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. The Lord will cleanse the impurities of His people (Zech. 13:1-4).
2. The Lord will fight and win the victory for His people (Zech. 14:1-7).
3. The Lord will reign with provision and security for His people (Zech. 14:8-11).

Background Passage: Zechariah 13–14

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

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

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

The prophet Zechariah spoke of a day when the Lord would cleanse His people and reign over them in triumph. When Jesus returns, He will put an end to all sin and reign over creation in triumph and all who have trusted in Him will live securely with Him forevermore.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

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.

GROUP TIME

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

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.

DISCUSS: What are some reasons we decide to clean up our home, yard, or workspace? (we are procrastinating for another task; the mess has become too much for our own sensibilities; complaints from neighbors or the fear of their impressions about us; to avoid a fine; because we have company coming over and don't want them to feel awkward or have to endure our own mess)

TRANSITION: Just like we want to clean things up when we have company coming, God's people had to be cleansed before the Lord could come and dwell with them. Their sins had separated them from the Lord, both physically in exile and spiritually. But God's desire to dwell with His people meant that He would have to cleanse them from their iniquities and prepare them so that His holy presence could live among them.

OPTIONAL QUESTION: Since our sin creates a barrier between us and God, what should we do? (confess our sin and turn away from it; seek the Lord's strength and help to have our desires, attitudes, and actions changed to conform to His ways; live according to His Word, not out of duty but out of love and honor)

POINT 1

THE LORD WILL CLEANSE THE IMPURITIES OF HIS PEOPLE (ZECH. 13:1-4).

NOTES

1 “On that day a fountain will be opened for the house of David and for the residents of Jerusalem, to wash away sin and impurity. **2** On that day”—this is the declaration of the LORD of Armies—“I will remove the names of the idols from the land, and they will no longer be remembered. I will banish the prophets and the unclean spirit from the land. **3** If a man still prophesies, his father and his mother who bore him will say to him, ‘You cannot remain alive because you have spoken a lie in the name of the LORD.’ When he prophesies, his father and his mother who bore him will pierce him through. **4** On that day every prophet will be ashamed of his vision when he prophesies; they will not put on a hairy cloak in order to deceive.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Zechariah 13:1-4** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 1** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

God foretold of a day when the hearts of His people would be **restored** and **cleansed** to follow Him perfectly.

DISCUSS: What responses should people have to God’s offer of forgiveness and cleansing from sin? (confess our sins to God and to each other; seek people to keep us accountable to holy living; stay rooted in Christian disciplines such as prayer, worship, and Bible study; a desire to share this good news with others)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 2-4** commentary to show how the result of personal transformation among God’s people will bring about renewed life among the community of God’s people (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #80: People of God: Scripture describes the church as “the people of God” (2 Cor. 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.

TRANSITION: As God’s people experience the grace of cleansing, their treasuring of the Word of God will remind them that the Lord will fight their battles and be victorious for them.

THE PROPHET ELIJAH

Elijah was from Tishbeh, a town in Gilead. He was seen as hairy or wearing a hairy cloak and a leather belt (2 Kings 1:8). He was a prophet of God who spoke judgment against Ahab and the worshipers of Baal (1 Kings 17–18). God walked with him in challenging his enemies and miraculously took Elijah to be with Him, such that Elijah did not die but was carried from this earth in a whirlwind and a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2). Some false prophets claimed to be like Elijah when they were not.

COMMENTARY

VERSE 1 / Though the people of Judah had returned to the land and had been following the Lord's plan for the rebuilding of the temple, Zechariah the prophet called the Lord's people to continue in faithfulness to God. He called them to a purified heart, not merely a rebuilt temple.

In Zechariah 13:1, the prophet pointed and looked forward to a future day when God would cleanse His people completely. **"On that day"** recalls a number of actions of the Lord listed in 12:3,4,6,8,9,11 and includes a promise that "the house of David and the residents of Jerusalem" (12:10; 13:1) would receive a spirit of grace and prayer. They will mourn over their sin but will find that a flood of tears cannot solve the problem of their sin (12:11). This day refers to the day when Christ returns, when He makes all things new, judging the righteous and unrighteous based on those who put their faith in Him and His saving work.

So on this day, what will wash away their sins if their tears cannot cleanse them? **"A fountain will be opened,"** Zechariah said, and it will flow continually. What this fountain, this inexhaustible well, would do is wash away sin and impurity from the people's hearts and lives forever.

Cleansing by the washing of water was a regular practice of the priesthood as the sprinkling of water was used to cleanse and purify themselves (Num. 8:7). King David also referred to being washed with water to be cleansed from sin (Ps. 51:2,7). Those who had come into contact with a dead body were to be sprinkled clean with water (Num. 19:12). Because the people had come into contact with death by piercing their very own God (Zech. 12:10), they needed to be cleansed.¹ Sin has corrupted everything, separating humanity from God. In some respects, the One who was pierced is the One from whom the fountain of cleansing would flow.

VERSES 2-4 / Not only will there be personal renewal, but the people of God

as a whole will seek the Lord and desire to live for Him. Instead of sin being allowed to flourish, God's people, referring to the Israelites in history as well as the church today, will radically be cleansed of all iniquity and sin.

"On that day" again connects back to 13:1, where the fountain of cleansing opens up and brings personal renewal. The result of the inner transformation that this cleansing brings is a change in the people of God and their attitude towards idolatry and false prophecy. These sins, along with disobedience to God's other commands, were predominant before the exile and resulted in God's people being deported (see Ezek. 22:3-15).

So great will be the removal of idolatry that it won't be just carved images that are removed but the names of these idols as well. The power and characteristics of these idols that shaped the community also will be removed so that they will become a thing of the past.² In addition, those who have prophesied falsely will be removed. The **"spirit of uncleanness"** that is referred to here is probably connected to the message of the false prophets and is contrary to "the spirit of grace and prayer" mentioned in 12:10.

The penalty for idol worship and false prophets was death (see Deut. 13:6-11; 18:20). So parents whose children promoted false prophecy were to rebuke their children for speaking lies and were to **"pierce him through."** The transformation of God's people will be so thorough that they will not tolerate any falsehood.

Finally, the community's cleansing will result in the false prophets being ashamed that they spoke falsely. These false prophets will stop wearing the prophetic clothing that makes them look like they are following in Elijah's footsteps (see 1 Kings 19:9; 2 Kings 1:8). The purification of God's people will result in loyalty to the Word of the Lord. No other word will be tolerated.

POINT 2

THE LORD WILL FIGHT AND WIN THE VICTORY FOR HIS PEOPLE (ZECH. 14:1-7).

1 Look, a day belonging to the LORD is coming when the plunder taken from you will be divided in your presence. **2** I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem for battle. The city will be captured, the houses looted, and the women raped. Half the city will go into exile, but the rest of the people will not be removed from the city. **3** Then the LORD will go out to fight against those nations as he fights on a day of battle. **4** On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which faces Jerusalem on the east. The Mount of Olives will be split in half from east to west, forming a huge valley, so that half the mountain will move to the north and half to the south. **5** You will flee by my mountain valley, for the valley of the mountains will extend to Azal. You will flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of King Uzziah of Judah. Then the LORD my God will come and all the holy ones with him. **6** On that day there will be no light; the sunlight and moonlight will diminish. **7** It will be a unique day known only to the LORD, without day or night, but there will be light at evening.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Zechariah 14:1-7** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 1-3** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

Zechariah reminded the hopeless nation of Judah that the Lord **fighters** for His people in His **timing**, and He is always **victorious**.

DISCUSS: What are some ways we can remind ourselves of God's faithfulness and eternal victory in the midst of our trials? (recall from God's Word His promises to be faithful; remember that He will never leave nor forsake us; remember His past victories over His enemies; know that Christ's return will bring ultimate joy)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 4-7** commentary to emphasize the following idea (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

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

TRANSITION: Because the Lord has cleansed His people and purchased their victory, He will reign over them and give them security with Him forever.

NOTES

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."³

—Betsie ten Boom
(1885-1944)

COMMENTARY

VERSES 1-3 / At the time of Zechariah's visions, the Jewish community had few reasons to be hopeful. They had been reduced to a small insignificant province under the control of a larger empire. Their glory days under David and Solomon were long gone. Yet into this situation, the Lord gave His people an eternal perspective, lifting their eyes from their present troubles so that they might see God's purposes and live with hope.⁴

As this section begins, attention is drawn to what will happen in the future: **"Look."** What is described sounds similar to the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC, when Nebuchadnezzar tore down the walls of Jerusalem, took the sacred vessels from the temple, burned down the house of the Lord, and took the people into exile (see 2 Chron. 36:15-20). In a similar way, Zechariah saw that Jerusalem would be attacked, captured, houses looted, women raped, half the city taken into exile, and the plunder taken from the city would be divided in front of Jerusalem's inhabitants. The Lord had told His people through Moses that these would be the consequences for disobeying Him and worshipping other gods (see Deut. 28:29-30). This disciplinary siege and conquest will take place on a day that only the Lord knows and has determined. On that day, the nations will be gathered to battle against Jerusalem for her sin.

This apocalyptic language has resulted in many interpretations. Some believe that this passage should be taken literally. Others see this passage as being symbolic. Regardless of how one interprets the passage, what is clear is that a future day is coming—a day belonging to the Lord—when judgment will come to the nations as well for their evil deeds as **"the LORD will go out to fight against those nations as he fights on a day of battle."** When everything appears to be hopeless, the Lord is faithful, and He will come to deliver His people, just as He had fought and rescued His people at the exodus and the conquest

of the promised land (see Ex. 14:14; 15:1-21; Josh. 10:14,42; 23:3).

VERSES 4-7 / **"On that day,"** we are told of how God will bring about His victory. He will return to Jerusalem as He promised to make it His faithful city, the city of those He loves and has saved (Zech. 8:3). Facing east towards the city, the Lord's approach will mirror the entrances of other sanctuaries God set up, including Eden, the tabernacle, and the temple. Now Jerusalem is portrayed as a new sanctuary of the Lord.⁵ But His coming will shake the heavens and the earth when He plants His feet on the Mount of Olives. This mountain ridge east of Jerusalem will split in half when the Lord comes, creating a wide valley for the escape of His people, just as the waters of the Red Sea were split for the exodus and salvation of His people out of Egypt (Ex. 14:21).

The newly formed valley will provide the remnant in Jerusalem with an escape route to Azal (an unknown place to the east of Jerusalem), allowing the people to flee like they did after an earthquake that shook Jerusalem in the days of Amos and Uzziah (see Amos 1:1-2). The result of this shaking of the heavens and the earth will be the Lord's return to Jerusalem with His holy angels.

This unique day (v. 7) suggests that this event will take place when the light of the sun and moon will be darkened, a day only known by the Lord. His victory over His enemies will be complete and He will establish His reign forever. During Jesus's time, when the disciples asked about that "day" as they sat on the Mount of Olives, Jesus warned them to be watchful and faithful (Mark 13:1-23). He also said when the sun and moon darken and the powers in the heavens shake, then He will send out His angels to gather His people to Himself (Mark 13:24-27). The coming of the new heavens and new earth will be accomplished by the Lord in His timing, and Christ will bring the final victory for His people.

POINT 3

THE LORD WILL REIGN WITH PROVISION AND SECURITY FOR HIS PEOPLE (ZECH. 14:8-11).

NOTES

8 On that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem, half of it toward the eastern sea and the other half toward the western sea, in summer and winter alike. **9** On that day the LORD will become King over the whole earth—the LORD alone, and his name alone. **10** All the land from Geba to Rimmon south of Jerusalem will be changed into a plain. But Jerusalem will be raised up and will remain on its site from the Benjamin Gate to the place of the First Gate, to the Corner Gate, and from the Tower of Hananel to the royal winepresses. **11** People will live there, and never again will there be a curse of complete destruction. So Jerusalem will dwell in security.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Zechariah 14:8-11** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 8-9** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

On the day of the Lord, a flow of water will **cleanse** the world as the Lord proclaims His ultimate **kingship** over all.

DISCUSS: What are some ways you can show the world that Jesus is King over your life? (share the gospel of Jesus with others; obey Jesus's commands throughout the Bible; live for the glory of God and not your own; praise Jesus in your words and deeds)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 10-11** commentary to emphasize the following idea (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

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

DISCUSS: How should the promise of Christ's coming kingdom cause you to live today? (as holy people who desire to reflect lives that are worthy of the coming kingdom; telling others about Jesus Christ and His power to cleanse sinners from sin and give them victory over death; have an urgency to talk about the Lord with others around us)

THE APOSTLE JOHN

John, the brother of James, was a close friend of Jesus and one of the twelve disciples. He was there at the transfiguration of Jesus (Matt. 17:1-9) and was the one to whom Jesus entrusted the care of His mother, Mary, at His crucifixion (John 19:26-27). John was exiled to the island of Patmos, where he received the visions he recorded in the book of Revelation. He wrote five of the New Testament books.

COMMENTARY

VERSES 8-9 / When the Lord secures His victory over the nations, a stream of **“living water will flow out from Jerusalem.”** The flow of water will be substantial—it will continue in the hot, dry summer and in the cool of winter. It will flow to the east (the Dead Sea) and to the west (the Mediterranean Sea). This water is described as **“living”** water—it is fresh and springing up, possibly from the cleansing fountain described in Zechariah 13:1.

Because the Lord has shaken the earth by planting His feet on the Mount of Olives (14:4), His living water will flow without end. Just like water flowed from Eden (Gen. 2:10), now the waters that flow from Jerusalem express fruitfulness, abundance, and blessing.

As a display of His victory, the Lord will be king over the whole earth. Just as David would say that “the earth is the LORD’s” (Ps. 24:1), now His rule over the whole earth will be established by His defeat of the nations and the salvation He has brought for His people. For only He is the King of all the earth. Because the worship of idols and false prophets has been removed from the land (Zech. 13:2), only God’s name will be worshiped and adored.

This picture of a life-giving stream flowing from the city of God appears again in Revelation 22:1-2. The water that flows comes from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the city’s main street, giving abundance and life to the tree of life on each side of the river. The result of this pure flowing water is that it brings blessing and life to trees that produce leaves that are for the healing of the nations. Just as Zechariah saw a day when the Lord would reign, the apostle John saw a similar day coming that would show that the reign of God brings blessing to the entire world.

VERSES 10-11 / The result of the Lord’s reign is that Jerusalem will be lifted up while the surrounding hill country will be brought

low and become a plain. From the northern boundary of Judah (**“Geba”**) to its southern boundary (**“Rimmon”**), the rough places will become a plain as the glory of the Lord appears (cf. Isa. 40:4-5). Jerusalem’s elevation in this prophecy may suggest that the city of the great King has been restored to its rightful and prominent place as the capital of the Lord God.

The result of the Lord’s reign will be that His people will return to dwell securely in the city and live there in complete peace. There will be no threat of the city’s destruction ever again because all of the things that were unworthy and ought to have been devoted to destruction will have been removed forever. Just like the people of God were to devote to destruction those things that the Lord called “detestable” in the conquest of the land of Canaan (cf. Deut. 7:25ff), so God has purified His city by removing all that is false and evil. Those who are considered unclean will not live there (14:21). Instead, the city will be secure and have abundance forever. Because God Himself will dwell with His people, the city will experience peace without end.

Just like Zechariah, the apostle John had a vision of the holy city coming down from above. This city would join God and humanity together (Rev. 21:3). The curse that had been pronounced in Genesis 3 will finally be reversed once and for all, along with all the effects of the curse removed (Rev. 21:4). The Alpha and Omega will give the water of life to those who are thirsty (Rev. 21:6). And the city of God will not have any unclean person within its walls (Rev. 21:8). As the one true King, God’s victory over sin and death will have been accomplished and He shall reign forever and ever (Rev. 11:15). Even now, Christians wait for that blessed hope—the day when the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, comes to pass (Titus 2:13).

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:

God is coming to dwell with His people. His victory over sin and death provide a way for sinners to live with their God in peace and security. His victory will secure His kingdom forever, where there will be no more sin or sorrow, disease or death, pain or persecution. Instead, God's people will dwell with Him with the confidence that His truth has prevailed.

How should Christ's final victory give you encouragement for today?

HEART:

Our hearts should be moved with gratitude to the Lord for cleansing us from sin and preparing us an eternal home with Him. We should rejoice with gladness that though hardships will come our way, our future is secure in Christ when we have repented and turned from our sins, have trusted Him to be our Savior, and await His blessed hope to appear at Jesus's return and the final resurrection.

How will you express your gratitude for the Lord's victory over sin?

HANDS:

Because Christ is coming again, we have been given His ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:16–6:2). We should urgently plead with others around us, in a winsome and wise way, that they would understand that a day of judgment is coming, and only those who trust in the Lord Jesus will be delivered from sin and death. Everyone who believes in Jesus can experience His victory and live in the fullness of His joy now and forevermore.

With whom will you share God's mighty works to restore, save, and provide for sinners?

NOTES

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."⁶

—Charles Wesley
(1707-1788)

POINT 1: THE LORD WILL CLEANSE THE IMPURITIES OF HIS PEOPLE (ZECH. 13:1-4).

+ COMMENTARY

“God not only offers grace and forgiveness but also cleansing from the impure stains of past rebellion, especially in connection with false prophecy and idolatry. The challenge of false prophecy and idolatry was fundamentally a challenge to God’s sovereignty. Through such means, the people were desirous of spiritual knowledge without the ‘constraints’ of relationship with their covenant God. In the New Testament this cleansing is provided through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross applied through the work of the Holy Spirit.”⁷

+ ILLUSTRATION

Before you meet as a group, locate and bring a piece of stained cloth. Hold it up for everyone to see. Discuss how some stains are on the surface while others actually work their way into the weave of the fabric, becoming almost impossible to remove. Some stains require scrubbing with soap and sunlight to pull out the dirt, while others can only be removed by bleach and water in the wash.

Sin is like a deep stain that has worked its way into the very fibers of the fabric of our lives. These stains cannot be removed by a little effort; it requires a deep washing and cleansing. The purifying work that is needed can’t come by a little scrubbing, nor can it come by the shedding of many tears. What we need is the fountain that flows from Immanuel’s side. Because of Christ’s shed blood, the penalty and power of sin’s stain is dealt with so that we might be able to come into the presence of a most holy God. This is how the writer of Hebrews understood Christ’s washing: “Since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed in pure water” (Heb. 10:21-22). Just as the priest could not come into the presence of God in the tabernacle or temple without the ceremonial washing, it is the same for us today. Christ’s blood washes us clean so that we can come before a perfect and holy God.

POINT 2: THE LORD WILL FIGHT AND WIN THE VICTORY FOR HIS PEOPLE (ZECH. 14:1-7).

+ COMMENTARY

“One of the greatest examples of God’s deliverance was the parting of the Red Sea during the exodus. Moses and the Israelites were trapped against that body of water, but God drove back the waves and made a passage for their escape, destroying Pharaoh and his chariots when they tried to follow. In a like manner, now the Lord will part the Mount of Olives to provide an escape toward the east.”⁸

+ COMMENTARY

“After the initial success of the nations, the Lord himself will come to fight against them to save the righteous remnant (14:3; see 9:14-15; 12:9). He will appear as a divine warrior, just as he has done in the past (see Josh 10:14). The Messiah will physically stand on the Mount of Olives (14:4a). This is the very place to which God’s glory departed before the temple was destroyed in 587 BC (Ezek 10:18-19; 11:22-24), the place where Jesus spoke with his disciples concerning the end times (Matt 24), and the place from which he ascended into heaven (Acts 1:12). It will also be the place to which he returns. When he again stands on the Mount of Olives, it will split in two from east to west, forming a great valley (14:4b). This will provide an escape route along which his people can flee from their enemies, just as their ancestors fled the earthquake in King Uzziah’s time (see Amos 1:1; Rev 16:18-19). The Lord himself will then come with his holy ones, that is, his saints and angels to destroy his enemies (14:5; Isa 66:15-16; Matt 16:27; 24:30-31; 25:31).”⁹

+ ILLUSTRATION

Escape rooms have become incredibly popular. Have someone from the group describe their experience in an escape room. Have them recount how they had to put together various clues and pieces to find their way out of a room. If no one has had this experience, describe the modern phenomenon: People are locked in a room, and during a set period of time, they are to figure out various clues in order that will enable them to leave the room. If they are successful, they will find an access code or key that allows them to escape and succeed.

Imagine not having any clues to be able to escape, no resources to enable you to flee, and being in a situation where you are not able to free yourself. While an escape room is a fun group activity, being stuck in a situation where there is harm or danger looming can cause great worry and fear. In the Scriptures, the Lord’s people often found themselves in situations that were impossible to escape from by their own human strength and ingenuity. Rather, the Lord was the only One who could intervene and deliver His people from harm and danger. Those situations that seemed impossible were actually the means for God to display His salvation so that no one would boast in their strength but in the Lord alone.

Because the Lord’s promise is that we will be delivered, we should trust Him that He will provide a way of escape in the moment by moment trials and temptations we experience in life (1 Cor. 10:13).

POINT 3: THE LORD WILL REIGN WITH PROVISION AND SECURITY FOR HIS PEOPLE (ZECH. 14:8-11).

+ COMMENTARY

“Hope is also strengthened by looking forward. In passages such as this, Scripture encourages us to do so by providing glimpses of the glory that is yet to be. In this way we will be stirred up to that eager, almost impatient, expectation that characterizes the whole creation as it waits for the sons of God to be revealed (Rom. 8:19,23). Looking forward also helps us to regain a right, God-centered perspective on life. The emphasis is on what the LORD will do on that day, on what he will be seen to be. It is the vindication of his name and the establishment of his rights that fires the soul of the faithful.”¹⁰

+ ILLUSTRATION

Children often latch onto a faint promise and get incredible hope of something coming in the future. Consider a time when someone may have made a promise to you as a child, such as when you may have heard that the family “might” take a vacation to a prominent theme park. These hints or suggestions of what might be creates a waiting, a deep anticipation with a sense of certainty that it will happen.

Our use of the word “hope” can often be confusing to people. When we use the word “hope” today, it can imply a wishful thinking, a desire with expectation that something might happen in the future. It often has a sense of uncertainty about it.

But with the Lord, Christians ought to have a certain hope. Christian hope is rooted in the certain promises of God. He will keep His word. He will accomplish all that He says He will do. Like a child who latches onto a faint promise, Christians should latch onto the promises of God with the sure and certain expectation that the Lord never fails in keeping His promises. While the timing may not be what we expect, the Lord is not slow in keeping His promises, as some understand slowness (see 2 Peter 3:9).

References

1. Mark J. Boda, Haggai, Zechariah, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 490.
2. John L. Mackay, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Focus on the Bible Commentary (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2003) [Logos].
3. Corrie ten Boom with Elizabeth and John Sherrill, The Hiding Place (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen, 2006), 84.
4. Mark J. Boda, Haggai, Zechariah, The NIV Application Commentary, 538.
5. Anthony R. Petterson, “Zechariah,” in ESV Expository Commentary, vol. 7, Daniel–Malachi (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 723.
6. Charles Wesley, “Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending,” Hymnary.org, June 6, 2022, https://hymnary.org/text/lo_he_comes_with_clouds_descending_once.
7. Mark J. Boda, Haggai, Zechariah, The NIV Application Commentary, 500.
8. Richard D. Phillips, Zechariah, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 308.
9. Yoilah Yilpet, “Zechariah,” in Africa Bible Commentary, gen. ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 1117.
10. John L. Mackay, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Focus on the Bible Commentary, 262-63.

A TEMPLE RESTORED

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. The people obey because of divine encouragement (Ezra 4:24–5:2).
2. The people succeed because of divine intervention (Ezra 6:13-15).
3. The people rejoice because of divine sovereignty (Ezra 6:16-22).

Background Passage: Ezra 2–6

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

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

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

When the people rebuilt the temple, God promised that the glory of the temple would be greater than that of the first. This promise was fulfilled in Jesus, who emptied Himself by assuming the form of a servant so that through doing so, God could dwell with His people and reveal His glory.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

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

GROUP TIME

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

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.

DISCUSS: Why is it difficult to wait when we want something to happen? (we're used to instant gratification; we're impatient; waiting is hard; it's easy to lose hope; life is uncertain)

TRANSITION: God's people faced opposition from some enemies who were living in the land of Judah. They raised questions with the highest authority about the integrity of the Jews claim that they were to rebuild the temple. Because they faced these challenges, the Lord provided His people with encouragement and His providential working so that the temple could be rebuilt and the people could rejoice in the Lord.

OPTIONAL QUESTION: What are some ways that the Lord has encouraged you when you have felt stuck in your faith? (through Scripture; through corporate worship; through a friend who brought a timely word of advice or support; a listening ear; a gift from someone who met a practical need; wise counsel from a friend, pastor, or counselor)

POINT 1

THE PEOPLE OBEY BECAUSE OF DIVINE ENCOURAGEMENT (EZRA 4:24–5:2).

4:24 Now the construction of God’s house in Jerusalem had stopped and remained at a standstill until the second year of the reign of King Darius of Persia. **5:1** But when the prophets Haggai and Zechariah son of Iddo prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them, **2** Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua son of Jozadak began to rebuild God’s house in Jerusalem. The prophets of God were with them, helping them.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Ezra 4:24–5:2** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 4:24** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

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

DISCUSS: Why is it easy to get distracted from the Lord’s work? (we’re too focused on our present needs; we get tired of waiting; we want instant gratification and immediate results; we can’t see the full picture)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 5:1-2** commentary to emphasize the following idea (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

The **words** and **actions** of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah **encouraged** God’s people to obey God’s will and commands.

DISCUSS: Why is it important to listen to godly wisdom from God’s people? (because we do not always know what is right; we often have a limited perspective; the church is there to encourage each other toward godly living; we are made for community to seek God and His wisdom together)

TRANSITION: The word of the Lord brought encouragement to the people to obey His commands, and because the Lord had given them His commands, He would ensure their obedience by intervening for them in the day of trouble.

NOTES

KING DARIUS

Darius I Hystapes, mentioned here as “King Darius of Persia,” is to be distinguished from “Darius the Mede” in Daniel 5–6. Darius I was king of Persia from 521 to 486 BC, during which time the temple was rebuilt after the Israelites’ captivity. Haggai and Zechariah prophesied during his reign.

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.”¹

–Elisabeth Elliot
(1926-2015)

COMMENTARY

VERSE 4:24 / After the Jews had returned to the promised land with the mission and encouragement to build the temple on account of Cyrus's decree in Ezra 1:1-4, they faced repeated challenges and opposition to its construction. Verse 24 picks up following the historical events that occurred in Ezra 4:1-5. Shortly after the work had begun, opposition came against the people. Rebuilding efforts were not only slowed, they were stopped entirely.

Two years after their return, the former exiles completed and celebrated the foundation of the new temple being laid, but then came the opposition. For a significant amount of time, nothing happened on the rebuilding project. Haggai 1:1-11 describes the Lord rebuking the people for taking time to build their own houses while the house of the Lord remained in ruins. Economic hardships (Hag. 1:6) and drought (Hag. 1:11) would further exacerbate the delay of the temple's rebuilding. Ezra 4:24 records that the building resumed in the second year of the reign of Darius, king of Persia (around 520 BC), suggesting that the delay was approximately fifteen years in duration.

The opposition described in this verse would be a continual struggle during the rebuilding of the temple and the city of Jerusalem itself, as Ezra 4:6-23 indicates. At times, the opposition would be effective in stopping the building and causing great discouragement. At every moment when progress was attempted, resistance would grow.

VERSES 5:1-2 / Two prophets are specifically mentioned in Ezra 5:1: **"Haggai"** and **"Zechariah."** These two prophets had their words recorded in separate books called their names. These prophets were given a specific task: They were to prophesy to the Jews by speaking the word of God to the post-exilic community in Judah and Jerusalem. Their task was to reprove, correct, and instruct the people regarding the rebuilding of the temple. For quite some

time, the task of rebuilding the temple had stopped because of the opposition that the people faced. Now, these two prophets came with the life-giving words of the God of Israel so that the people would hear the authoritative word of the Lord and obey His voice. Their messages were a reminder that the God of Israel had not abandoned them; rather, the sending of His prophets was an act of merciful love to remind the discouraged and faint-hearted Jews that their God was still over them.

The prophetic word of the Lord was heeded by **"Zerubbabel,"** the son of Shealtiel, and **"Jeshua,"** the son of Jozadak, both mentioned earlier in Ezra 2:2. These two key leaders had led the returnees back. Zerubbabel served as a governing official and connection to the Davidic line (see 1 Chron. 3:16-19); Jeshua was the high priest who gave direction and leadership to the temple servants. Together, these men heeded the word of the Lord and led the people to continue the rebuilding efforts that Cyrus had decreed earlier. Just as the Lord had roused the spirit of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1) and the hearts of the people (1:5), now the Lord roused the spirits of His leaders by His all-powerful word.

These prophets, however, were not mere preachers of the word of the Lord. They were **"with them, helping them."** The word of the Lord was so great that it stirred leaders and prophets to action. Because of God's word through the prophets and because of the prophetic work among the people, God's people were roused again to take up the task they had been given. Standing together with the people, Haggai and Zechariah brought the necessary encouragement from the Lord to enable the people to move forward. This task was not merely one that had been permitted by Cyrus. The rebuilding of the Lord's temple was the very will of God for His people to accomplish. Because it was the Lord's will, the Lord would ensure that His people had everything necessary to do His good work.

POINT 2

THE PEOPLE SUCCEED BECAUSE OF DIVINE INTERVENTION (EZRA 6:13-15).

NOTES

13 Then Tattenai governor of the region west of the Euphrates River, Shethar-bozenai, and their colleagues diligently carried out what King Darius had decreed. **14** So the Jewish elders continued successfully with the building under the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah son of Iddo. They finished the building according to the command of the God of Israel and the decrees of Cyrus, Darius, and King Artaxerxes of Persia. **15** This house was completed on the third day of the month of Adar in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.

READ: On account of some difficult names, read aloud **Ezra 6:13-15** yourself for this point.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 13** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

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

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 14-15** commentary to highlight the following doctrine, noting that in His infinite power, God was orchestrating the completion of the temple (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #19: God Is Infinite: God's infinity means that there are no boundaries on His qualities and existence (Job 11:7-9; Ps. 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** (Ps. 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.

DISCUSS: How should we live knowing that God is infinite? (we should not fear when trouble comes; we should trust God in all things; we should believe that He is working out His sovereign plan even when it's difficult to see)

TRANSITION: The people's obedience to God's command resulted in the successful completion of the temple and resulted in the people rejoicing in the sovereign Lord of history.

KING ARTAXERXES

King of Persia from 465 to 423 BC. He stopped the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem because of letters written by Israel's enemies (Ezra 4:23). But later, he allowed Ezra to take back to Jerusalem whomever he wanted and to take resources to support the ministry of the temple (7:11-26). He is mentioned again later as the king to whom Nehemiah was the cupbearer and who allowed Nehemiah to go to Jerusalem with his blessing and support to rebuild the city and its walls (Neh. 2).

COMMENTARY

VERSE 13 / Ezra 6 begins with King Darius of Persia commanding that there be a search for the decree by Cyrus. The Persian leaders in Judah had requested from Darius proof of permission for the Jews to rebuild the temple. A search was conducted, revealing that Cyrus indeed had decreed that the temple be rebuilt in Jerusalem. To Tattenai and Shethar-bozenai, two Persian officials in the region of Judah, along with their companions, Darius gave his permission for the temple to be rebuilt, and he included that his officials were to assist the Jews with supplies for the temple construction and offerings for Jewish worship.

Darius's edict was so strong that it included a warning to anyone who would interfere with the temple rebuilding:

Let a beam be torn from his house and raised up; he will be impaled on it, and his house will be made into a garbage dump because of this offense. May the God who caused his name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who dares to harm or interfere with this house of God in Jerusalem. (Ezra 6:11-12a)

So the work was to be done with all diligence (6:12b), just as it had begun with all diligence (5:8).

The result of Darius's edict was complete obedience by the Persian officials, with them diligently carrying out everything that King Darius had decreed (6:13). Certainly the threat of impalement would have spurred them on to follow every order with great eagerness! Tattenai had also been a diligent Persian leader, checking in with Darius about the decree of Cyrus, waiting for confirmation, and then fulfilling the king's commands to their full extent.

All of these events, however, happened because of the gracious intervention of the Lord, for God was watching over the Jewish elders and ensuring that their hearts would stay devoted to His work to rebuild His temple and restore His worship (5:5).

VERSES 14-15 / The result of the decree by Darius was that the temple was finally completed. But the way that the temple was completed was by the mighty hand of God orchestrating all events and people, first with the encouragement of Haggai and Zechariah to spur on the Jewish elders, as we read in Ezra 5:1-2.

Second, God used **"Cyrus,"** the Persian king, whose spirit was roused by the Lord to issue the edict for the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple of the Lord (Ezra 1:1). God was also working in **"Darius,"** a later king, who confirmed the edict of Cyrus after a diligent search and thus affirmed the work. And God worked in **"Artaxerxes,"** the final Persian king mentioned in this passage, whose later decrees contributed in permitting the reconstruction projects that would take place as described in Ezra 7-10 and Nehemiah 1-6. Since the temple was completed on the third day of the month of Adar in the sixth year of Darius's reign, Artaxerxes was included to show how the Lord would continue to move the hearts of foreign leaders so that His city could be reestablished.

Clearly, the One behind all of the actions regarding the temple was the God of Israel. By His power, the Lord put His words into the mouths of His prophets to encourage the leaders and people to rebuild the temple. Further, it was the Lord who moved the spirit of Cyrus to make the initial decree (1:1). And it was the Lord who worked in the lives of Darius, and later in Artaxerxes, so that His purposes were accomplished.

Once the rebuilding resumed, it took four years of diligent work until the completion of the temple. The specific dating by Darius's reign may be included to remind the reader of Jeremiah's prophecy. The time from Jerusalem's destruction and the sacking of the temple in 586 BC to the completion of the temple around 515 BC might account for the seventy years that Jeremiah prophesied regarding the exile (see Jer. 25:11-12; 29:10-14; Ezra 1:1).

POINT 3

THE PEOPLE REJOICE BECAUSE OF DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY (EZRA 6:16-22).

NOTES

16 Then the Israelites, including the priests, the Levites, and the rest of the exiles, celebrated the dedication of the house of God with joy.

17 For the dedication of God's house they offered one hundred bulls, two hundred rams, and four hundred lambs, as well as twelve male goats as a sin offering for all Israel—one for each Israelite tribe. **18** They also appointed the priests by their divisions and the Levites by their groups to the service of God in Jerusalem, according to what is written in the book of Moses. **19** The exiles observed the Passover on the fourteenth day of the first month. **20** All of the priests and Levites were ceremonially clean, because they had purified themselves. They killed the Passover lamb for themselves, their priestly brothers, and all the exiles. **21** The Israelites who had returned from exile ate it, together with all who had separated themselves from the uncleanness of the Gentiles of the land in order to worship the LORD, the God of Israel. **22** They observed the Festival of Unleavened Bread for seven days with joy, because the LORD had made them joyful, having changed the Assyrian king's attitude toward them, so that he supported them in the work on the house of the God of Israel.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Ezra 6:16-22** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 16-18** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

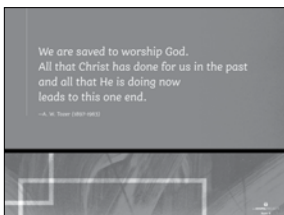
At the completion of the temple, God's people **rejoiced** and **worshiped** God diligently and wholeheartedly, following the Lord's commands.

DISCUSS: Read the quote on **PACK ITEM 9: SAVED TO WORSHIP**, and then ask: **What are some commands for how we are to worship God because of our salvation in Jesus Christ?** (we are to worship in spirit and truth [John 4:24]; we are to confess our sins [Hos. 14:2]; we are to worship the triune God: Father, Son, and Spirit [Phil. 3:3]; worship should comprise our whole lives [Rom. 12:1])

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 19-22** commentary to emphasize the following idea (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

God is **sovereign** and always at work rescuing His people, from Egypt, from exile, and through Christ, from **eternal** death and punishment.

DISCUSS: **How should belief in God's power to rescue us bring joy to your life?** (in times of trouble, knowing God is there brings joy; we can be thankful for our future inheritance; we can praise God that He is all-powerful and loves us no matter what; we can be glad He can rescue us from sin and shame)



COMMENTARY

VERSES 16-18 / With the completion of the temple, all the people came together to commemorate what God had done. The dedication included the temple servants, the priests and Levites, along with the rest of the people who had returned from exile to rebuild the temple. The **“dedication”** resulted in great **“joy”** as they offered a sacrifice of praise.

When Solomon offered up sacrifices at the completion of the first temple, the offerings and sacrifices could not be counted or numbered (see 2 Chron. 5:6). Here they were numbered and were not as great as before. Regardless, this was a celebration because the people’s center, identity, and focus had been restored through the building of the temple and the restoration of worship.

The offerings of twelve male goats for a sin offering reflects two aspects of Israel’s restored worship. First, the sin offering was for all of Israel, with twelve animals representing all twelve tribes of Israel. Second, the sin offerings were given as an acknowledgment that the whole nation had broken the covenant and had rightfully been disciplined by being sent into exile (see Jer. 11:6-11).

The people joyfully obeyed the word of the Lord, doing exactly what had been commanded in the books of Moses, showing their wholehearted devotion to the Lord. Further, the appointment of priests and Levites, as Moses had instructed, followed the pattern that kings David and Solomon had set for the worship of God at the first temple (see 1 Chron. 22:13; 23–26). This joyful worship reflected the people’s delight that the Lord was their covenant-keeping God, the One who ruled over them by His presence.

VERSES 19-22 / The restoration of worship at the temple included celebrating the **“Passover”** and the **“Festival of Unleavened Bread.”** The whole community of returnees worshiped the Lord at Passover about

a month after the temple was completed. After Passover, they celebrated the Festival of Unleavened Bread, eating bread without yeast for seven days. These celebrations were a reminder of God’s judgment passing over every house with blood on the doorposts, sparing the firstborn from death. These were a remembrance of their deliverance by God from the bondage of slavery and death in Egypt (see Ex. 12:1-22). Now, as Israel celebrated these festivals during the days of Ezra, they became a reminder of a new exodus: God’s people had been brought out of exile and into the land of promise to worship the Lord.

The priests and Levites purified themselves as the Law of Moses required (Lev. 22:1-9; Num. 8:5-22) and offered the Passover lamb for all the people (Ezra 6:20), separating the Israelites as holy people of a holy God. And they rejoiced because they knew God was at work from beginning to end.

As glorious as the renewed temple was during Ezra’s day, the fire that had come and consumed the offering and the glory that had descended upon the first temple did not happen at this second temple. The prophet Ezekiel had told of a day when the glory of the Lord would return to His holy temple (Ezek. 43:5). It would be another five hundred years before that glory would appear in the temple.

When Jesus came into the temple following His triumphal entry, Mark 11:11 tells us that He entered and looked around. No one noticed that the King of Glory had returned (cf. Ps. 24:7). But in Jesus Christ, the fullness of God was pleased to dwell (Col. 1:19). That glory came and dwelt among humanity (John 1:14). By coming to us, Jesus has shown us what the Father is like. God shines His revelation of glory into our hearts by His Spirit (2 Cor. 4:6), and we are being built into a holy temple of the Lord (Eph. 2:21-22). This should cause us to worship and praise God for His sovereign work of making us holy and blameless in Christ (Eph. 1:4).

MY RESPONSE



NOTES

PACK ITEM 10: GOD, OUR HELP HYMN: Pass out copies of this hymn and sing it together as a reminder that the sovereign God of Israel is still helping and saving people today.

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

HEAD:

God's grace is so great that He will work through His Word and the circumstances around His people so that they might obey Him. Through our obedience, God is glorified and we are helped.

What are some ways you have seen God glorified through the obedience of His people?

HEART:

While the rebuilt temple did not have a greater glory than the first one, Jesus came to earth and said that He is the temple of God (see John 2:19-21). By humbling Himself, becoming obedient to the point of death at the cross, He made a way for our sins to be removed and His righteousness to be imparted to us (Phil. 2:5-11). Through Jesus's death and resurrection, we now have access to God by His Spirit, and His glory is revealed to us and in us.

What aspect of what Jesus has done for you stands out to you that you can praise Him for today?

HANDS:

When our sins are removed, our consciences cleansed, and God places His Spirit within us, we are the temple of the Lord. Our lives should reflect that God is our first and greatest priority by giving Him all worship, praise, and adoration. These expressions of worship should affect our daily witness for Christ and motivate us to show that we seek first Christ and His kingdom.

How will you express your worship of God, in the Spirit and because of Jesus, through serving others this week?

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."²

—Hudson Taylor
(1832-1905)

POINT 1: THE PEOPLE OBEY BECAUSE OF DIVINE ENCOURAGEMENT (EZRA 4:24–5:2).

+ COMMENTARY

“Happily we possess the very words of Haggai and Zechariah, and can see in their books not only the fascinating contrast between the two prophets (Haggai the plain speaker, who dots every ‘i’, while Zechariah is provokingly enigmatic and visionary) but also the persistence and aptness of their preaching as the enterprise wore on.”³

+ ILLUSTRATION

Encouraging and motivating children can be very tricky. In many homes, parents have different approaches and personalities. Their differences may be complementary or contrasting. Some children will hear and respond better to one parent over another because of similar temperaments, personalities, or communication styles. Some children respond well to direct, concise communication while others will rise to the challenge upon getting the big picture. Sometimes parents find that they need outside support from someone who shares their ideals and values but who can communicate in a way that speaks differently to their child to enable their child’s understanding. But the goal is the same: to spur the child on to comprehend, appreciate, and follow a way of wisdom.

In a similar way, God had given His people two different prophets who spoke the word of God to them. Haggai’s direct, straight-forward approach challenged the people by speaking directly to their loss of focus. While the people had built homes for themselves, the Lord’s house had remained in ruins. Haggai’s words addressed the people’s lack of attention with directness.

Zechariah, on the other hand, spoke as a prophetic visionary. By looking at the future and seeing what the Lord was doing in the grand scheme of things, Zechariah’s words were intended to give the people a larger picture of God’s work.

Like children, people need both types of communication: direct, bold, and clear instructions along with visionary, future-oriented thinking, and hopefulness. One challenges and confronts us in our complacency; the other reorients our thinking with hopefulness so that we are spurred on. Both are necessary, and the Lord knows we need these encouragements and corrections.

POINT 2: THE PEOPLE SUCCEED BECAUSE OF DIVINE INTERVENTION (EZRA 6:13-15).

+ COMMENTARY

“The king’s officials carried out his commands with diligence, keen to prove their obedience to him (6:13). They had no personal hostility to the building project but had merely investigated it as an administrative matter. However, human effort alone would not have been enough to carry this project through. The Jews succeeded only because God was in charge of the whole process, providing funding and using Haggai and Zechariah to ensure that his word was proclaimed (6:14; 5:1-2; Ps 127:1). The temple was built according to the command of the God of Israel and according to the decrees of Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes. (Artaxerxes ruled some fifty years after the temple had been dedicated. Perhaps he is mentioned here in anticipation of the financial support he would later extend to the temple and its worship—7:12-26.)”⁴

+ ILLUSTRATION

In 1933, at the age of seven, a little boy named James was being chased by a bully when he ran out onto a busy roadway in London, England, and was struck by a bread truck. He sustained a massive head injury and was rushed to the hospital, where he underwent major surgery to remove bone fragments and was given a metal plate to protect his brain. From that time until he went to university, James wore the metal plate and was forbidden from any sports or activity that would cause harm.

But it was this incident that would be a forming moment for James. During his six months of convalescence, James grew fond of and fell in love with reading and books.

Already a loner, when he went back to school with his metal patch, he secluded himself from others even more. He missed out on many things that “normal” children would experience. On his eleventh birthday, he desperately wanted a bicycle just like other kids would receive around that age. He had left strong hints to his parents, but on that special day, he headed downstairs eagerly anticipating a set of wheels, only to find an old but excellent conditioned Oliver typewriter. Because his parents knew that one fall from a bicycle could prove deadly, they bought something else they thought he might learn to enjoy. The typewriter was old but in good condition. James initially was grieved at the sight of his gift. However, disappointment quickly turned into delight as soon as James began to type. The typewriter would later prove to be his most treasured possession. All his life, he never graduated to a computer but always used a typewriter to write.

Because James was disabled and weak, he could not receive the bicycle he desperately wanted, and instead, his parents gave him a typewriter. What has God done through James over these years? James Inness Packer, better known as J. I. Packer, has been one of the most influential Christian theologians and writers of our time. A world-famous theologian and prolific author, the boy that was thought to be at risk of a serious brain injury and who suffered so badly in childhood has been used by God in ways that seven-year-old boy could never have dreamed. Rather than wallowing in self-pity at what he could not do, Packer, with a dent in his head, used that same mind to glorify God.⁵

POINT 3: THE PEOPLE REJOICE BECAUSE OF DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY (EZRA 6:16-22).

+ COMMENTARY

“[Ezra 6:21] shows that there were Jews living in Judah other than the ones who returned from the exile. Apparently many had been assimilated with non-Jewish people who also lived there. The religious fervor of the returned exiles served to call these Jews back to the religious and ethical norms of the Torah, the books of Moses. Ezra and Nehemiah may give the impression that the returned exiles were very exclusive, but at least they accepted the other Jews (who had not been in Babylon) when they made a definite decision to follow God according to the Torah traditions.”⁶

+ ILLUSTRATION

Using a piece of paper, have group members draw a picture of the church. If it helps, ask group members what first comes to mind when they hear the word “church.” Ask them to share why they drew the image they did or to explain the image that came into their mind. Some may draw a picture of a church building; others may draw a picture of a group of people.

When people in the West think of “church,” it is almost always associated with a building. Much of a church budget goes towards the maintenance and renovation of a physical building. While these allocations of money are not wrong, the building itself is not the church but the church’s building.

The church is the gathered people of God where God dwells by His Spirit. The church is where the Word is proclaimed, the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper are practiced, and where the discipline of the church is carried out through constructive and corrective practices.

What ought to bring us joy should be more than a building; we should rejoice that God dwells with us by His Spirit and is forming us into the image of His Son. When we keep this focus as our priority, our eyes will be looking at how God is building a people who bear the name of the Lord Jesus.

Church buildings are tools that churches use to do ministry, but the building is never the ministry itself.

References

1. Elisabeth Elliot, *On Asking God Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 1989), 142.
2. Hudson Taylor, quoted in *The Story of the China Inland Mission*, by M. Geraldine Guinness, vol. 1 (London: Morgan & Scott, 1900), 238.
3. Derek Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, vol. 12, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979), 59-60 [Logos].
4. Augustine Pagolu, “Ezra,” in *South Asia Bible Commentary*, gen. ed. Brian Wintle (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 547.
5. Adapted from *Kiss the Wave*, by Dave Furman (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 101-102.
6. Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 1993), 121.

A PROMISE INHERITED

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. God is trustworthy, demonstrating His greatness (Ps. 118:8-9; Heb. 6:13-16).
2. God is trustworthy, manifesting His character (Heb. 6:17-18a).
3. God is trustworthy, anchoring His salvation (Heb. 6:18b-20).

Background Passages: Psalm 118; Hebrews 6

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

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

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

Because God cannot lie, all of what He has said can be trusted. Jesus, the Word of God, said that He is the way, the truth, and the life. All who trust in Jesus have been saved and have unwavering hope that Christ will return to make all things new.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

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.

GROUP TIME

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

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.

DISCUSS: Describe a time when you made a promise but you weren't able to keep it. What circumstances prevented you from keeping that promise? (be prepared to share an answer of your own to jump-start the conversation) [*Leader: People may have had a change in health, finances, employment, or many other factors. Be sympathetic to the reasons why people have been unable to keep their promises.*]

TRANSITION: While humans will find themselves in circumstances where they cannot keep a promise, God is committed to keeping His word. He cannot lie. Because God keeps His word, His character is trustworthy, grounding everything that He says and does. His trustworthiness demonstrates that while circumstances may change, God is greater than the circumstances. This means that we have something secure outside of ourselves upon which we can root our salvation.

OPTIONAL QUESTION: In an age when people struggle to know what is true, how does God's truthfulness encourage you? (we don't have to be uncertain about God's promises; He won't shift or change on us; He won't present us with information that is misleading or false; He will guide us into all truth by His Spirit and His Word)

POINT 1

GOD IS TRUSTWORTHY, DEMONSTRATING HIS GREATNESS (PS. 118:8-9; HEB. 6:13-16).

NOTES

Psalm 118:8 It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in humanity.

9 It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in nobles.

.....
Hebrews 6:13 For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater to swear by, he swore by himself: **14** I will indeed bless you, and I will greatly multiply you. **15** And so, after waiting patiently, Abraham obtained the promise. **16** For people swear by something greater than themselves, and for them a confirming oath ends every dispute.

READ: Ask two volunteers to read aloud **Psalm 118:8-9** and **Hebrews 6:13-16** from their Bibles.

EXPLAIN: Use the **PSALM 118:8-9** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

The psalmist reminds us to take **refuge** in the Lord because only He is fully **trustworthy**.

DISCUSS: What are some ways God has been trustworthy with His promises? (He saved a remnant of Israel as He promised; He brought His people back to the promised land after exile; He provided our Savior in Jesus as He promised; He is always with His people like He promised)

EXPLAIN: Use the **HEBREWS 6:13-16** commentary to emphasize the following idea (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

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

TRANSITION: God is trustworthy, and He shows that there is nothing greater than Himself because all of His promises are rooted in His perfect character.

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."¹

—Charles Spurgeon
(1834-1892)

COMMENTARY

PSALM 118:8-9 / Psalm 118 is the last of a group of psalms called the “hallelujah psalms” (Pss. 111–118). It would have been recited at the end of the Passover meal by an individual while drinking the final cup of celebration. Most likely this psalm was used early in Jewish life during the procession into the temple.²

The confession of the psalmist in verses 8-9 is that it is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in other people. In the complementary thought, the psalmist says that it is better to take refuge in the Lord rather than in princes. Those who are of a lowly position (humanity) or those with much power (nobles) do not compare in reliability to the Lord. While the average person may not be trustworthy, humans can be tempted to trust in those who have power and authority. Yet having power is no guarantee that someone is trustworthy. When Cyrus gave his decree for the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, there was no guarantee that they would receive all the help that they needed for the work. Opposition came (Ezra 3:3), and the people had to appeal to the Persian king Darius to finish the temple (Ezra 5–6). That human beings often are untrustworthy should have been understood from the past. Throughout Israel’s history, alliances with foreign leaders failed them (cf. Isa. 30:1-5).

Instead of trusting in nobles, Israel was reminded in this Passover song to **“take refuge in the LORD.”** The reason we should have confidence in the Lord is that He must be viewed as perfect in power and wisdom. While it is easy to acknowledge these truths about the Lord, it is another thing to believe that God alone can give the kind of help we need. Humans can be fickle, but God is steady and sure. Humans live for the moment, but God is working for His glory for eternity.

For these reasons, it is better to take refuge in the Lord. The Lord is like a strong tower that the righteous can run into and be safe (Prov. 18:10). He is the One who shelters

His people under His wing like a mother hen (Ps. 91:4). He is greater than nations, princes, and the powerful because He always keeps His word.

HEBREWS 6:13-16 / In Hebrews 6:12, the writer encouraged his readers to be “imitators of those who inherit the promises through faith and perseverance.” The example given in the following verses is that of Abraham.

God had promised to bless and multiply Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 and 15:5-7. The certainty of this promise was rooted in God’s swearing by Himself. Abraham was tested in his faith when he was asked to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, the son of promise that had come after years of infertility. As a result of Abraham’s faith in God’s promise, God swore by Himself that Abraham would see his family multiply (see Gen. 22:16-17).

Abraham waited patiently for this promise to come to pass. For years, he had waited for a descendant. Because Abraham and Sarah had reached an old age, Hebrews 11:12 says that he was considered as good as dead because he was past the age of being able to have children. Yet God was able to give him a child through Sarah who would fulfill the promise by leading to Jesus.

Humans often confirm their commitment to follow through on a promise by swearing to something greater. In a court of law, people are asked to swear to tell the truth by placing their hand upon a Bible. This act declares that if any falsehood is uttered, then the offender will be under the curse of the one by whom he or she swore. Everyone who makes an oath is committed to what they have said under oath and promises that their word is completely true.

While humans swear on something greater to confirm their word, God has nothing greater than Himself to swear by. Being holy and perfect, God is always truthful and He always does what He says He will.

POINT 2

GOD IS TRUSTWORTHY, MANIFESTING HIS CHARACTER (HEB. 6:17-18A).

NOTES

17 Because God wanted to show his unchangeable purpose even more clearly to the heirs of the promise, he guaranteed it with an oath, **18a** so that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie,

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Hebrews 6:17-18** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 17** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

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

DISCUSS: Since God has committed Himself to His promises, what effect should this have on our lives? (we should have confidence that God's promises will come to pass; we should expect that the gospel will transform us; we should want to speak the truth to those around us and not lie; we should be unafraid of pursuing the truth regardless of where it leads us)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 18A** commentary to emphasize the doctrine that God is truthful and cannot lie (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #18: God Is Truthful: The Scriptures are clear that in God there is no falsehood (Titus 1:2; Heb. 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).

DISCUSS: How does God's unchanging character to keep His word give you assurance in Him? (God will always keep His promises, regardless of how much our trust in Him may fluctuate; we can depend upon God never to falter in His plans; we can trust that He is a good God)

TRANSITION: Because God has revealed to us His unchanging character, we can trust His promises about salvation to be an anchor for our souls through the storms of life.

COMMENTARY

VERSE 17 / God's promise to Abraham was not only to the patriarch himself but to Abraham's offspring (Gen. 22:16-18)—**"the heirs of the promise."** This promise followed Isaac and his descendants, but Scripture says that Christ is the heir of all things (Heb. 1:2), and all those who have faith are sons of Abraham (Gal. 3:7). The promises were spoken to Abraham and his descendants who are in Christ (Gal. 3:16). Therefore, all who are in Christ Jesus by faith are heirs of the promise to receive the promised blessing. The multiplication that God promised Abraham has come about through the proclamation of the gospel's new covenant message, confirmed by Jesus's blood so that those who become disciples from all nations might receive the promises of God as well (Matt. 28:18).

In making this promise, God wanted to show that His **"unchangeable purpose"** would stand. If humans swearing an oath in a court of law attests to their truthfulness, then how much more reliable is the truth of God's word when He **"guaranteed it with an oath"**! The promise God made to Abraham is unchanging and gracious, and this purpose was His saving plan to rescue for Himself a people who would bear His name. This unchanging purpose has been confirmed with an oath, guaranteed like a legal guarantor would confirm a legal matter. By affixing His name and His reputation to this promise of salvation, God is guaranteeing that His plan of salvation will not be thwarted.

God's oath was fulfilled through an intermediary to actualize the promise. The One who came as this mediator of a new and better covenant is Jesus Christ Himself (see Heb. 8:6; 9:15). This new covenant is the one that God had promised through Jeremiah (Jer. 31:31-34): that He would put His law upon His people's hearts, He would forgive their iniquities and sins, and they would be His people and He would be their God. This is a covenant guaranteed by the blood of God's own Son, the mediator of this new and better covenant (Heb. 8:6; 9:15).

VERSE 18A / God's oath and God's promise are both confirmed here in the first half of verse 18 by rooting us in His unchanging character: **"It is impossible for God to lie."** Since God is greater than human beings, as we saw in Psalm 118:8-9, His word is more certain than that of a common person or a powerful noble. Scripture says that God is not a human being that He should lie or change His mind (Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; Titus 1:2). As the sovereign God, He can and will accomplish His purposes and will not be thwarted by any created being (Isa. 46:10-11).

The reason it is impossible for God to lie is because His character is that of perfect truth. Whatever God says is true, for His word is truth (John 17:17). It is impossible for God to do something that contradicts His nature and character. If God were to contradict Himself or lie, He would cease to be God. God is wholly true.

The second reason it is impossible for God to lie is due to His unchanging character. His promise and His oath are confirmed by the reality that the God who gave His promise in the past is the same God today. He has not shifted like shadows (Jas. 1:17), and His Son, Jesus, who is the exact representation of God's nature, is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 1:3; 13:8).

The very character of God is the anchor for the Christian's assurance that God will keep His promises and will fulfill His purpose of saving people until the very end. Christian assurance finds a solid ground underneath our feet when God is our refuge. God's promises are wrapped up in His character and nature. Beyond that, God has further bound Himself to His promises by swearing an oath. Therefore, by His own character and commitment, He will not let the promise of salvation falter or fail.

POINT 3

GOD IS TRUSTWORTHY, ANCHORING HIS SALVATION (HEB. 6:18B-20).

NOTES

18b we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to seize the hope set before us. **19** We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain. **20** Jesus has entered there on our behalf as a forerunner, because he has become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Hebrews 6:18-20** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 18B-19A** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

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

DISCUSS: Recall the Scripture verse on **PACK ITEM 11: TAKE REFUGE**, and then ask: **In what ways is God our refuge?** (we can turn to Him in prayer in times of trouble; we can ask Him to be our strength and help when we face times of temptation; we can consider His Word so that we might have ideas about how to do good to others and spur them on to faithful actions)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 19B-20** commentary to emphasize the following idea (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

Similar to Melchizedek, Jesus is our **priest** and **king** who atones for our sin and presents us before the Father as **blameless**.

DISCUSS: What confidence does Christ's work give you about your future? (when we are in Christ, there is no condemnation; our future has been secured with Him because our sins have been forgiven; we can pray with confidence that God welcomes us and hears our prayers)



MELCHIZEDEK

Priest and king of Salem during the time of Abraham (Gen. 14:18-20). In Psalm 110:1-4, the text refers to a leader and messiah who would be in the order, or pattern, of Melchizedek, meaning he will be both a priest and a king. This is in contrast to the rules for these roles under the Mosaic law, which separates these roles by tribe, Levi and Judah, respectively. Jesus as king comes from the tribe of Judah, but being Lord of all as well as the ultimate intercessor, having died for us, taking on our sin that we may be in constant relationship with the Father, He also fulfills the role of priest in the pattern of Melchizedek's ministry.

COMMENTARY

VERSES 18B-19A / The author of Hebrews continues in his thought that because God can't lie, we can have encouragement and hope.

He characterizes us believers as those **“who have fled for refuge.”** Throughout the Psalms, God is described as the One people can hide in to find refuge (see Ps. 46:1; 91:2). In the Old Testament, the Lord also provided cities of refuge for those fleeing from avengers (Deut. 4:42; 19:5). And like those who fled bondage and slavery in Egypt, as well as captivity in Babylon, so the writer compares the salvation experience with those who flee to Christ from the bondage of sin and death. God is the One who provides refuge for sinners through His Son.

God's promise and oath, then, give **“strong encouragement”** to help us grab onto **“the hope set before us.”** Hope is the certain guarantee of something that awaits us in the future (Heb. 11:1). What awaits believers in Christ in the future is the promise of God's salvation being fully realized one day—the kingdom that cannot be shaken (Heb. 12:28). With this hope, we are strengthened as believers to persevere under trial, fight against sin, and stir up one another with love and good deeds (Heb. 10:24).

This hope of the coming salvation that is realized now, though not fully, is described in verse 19a as an **“anchor for the soul.”** In a world where the storms of life toss us around and threaten to undo us, the writer of Hebrews describes God's promise as that which will keep us in place, as firmly as a boat would be anchored to keep it from drifting. God's unchanging nature and His inability to lie provide the reasons Christians have a **“firm and secure”** anchor for the soul. Salvation has been promised and guaranteed by God, and His character confirms that He will not be shaken in His resolve to save His people completely (Heb. 7:25).

VERSES 19B-20 / The hope that is an anchor for the soul, firm and secure, is the hope that **“enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain.”** Here, this hope is described with such boldness and confidence that the writer of Hebrews will later assure his readers that they can come without fear or dread into the most holy place of God's presence (Heb. 10:19-22). Believers are told that they can enter the most holy place that had been curtained off from the sanctuary in the tabernacle and the temple. This was a place only the high priest could enter on the Day of Atonement to offer up an offering for sin so that the people's iniquities would be atoned for (Lev. 16:2). This most holy place was the location where God dwelled between the cherubim who were on the ark of the covenant (1 Sam. 4:4; 1 Chron. 13:6; Isa. 37:16).

But because of Christ, we now can enter the inner sanctuary behind the curtain and approach God the Father ourselves. Jesus Himself has entered there **“on our behalf.”** When He died for our sins, the veil closing off the most holy place was torn from top to bottom in the temple (Matt. 27:50-51), symbolizing that we no longer need a high priest, that we can come before God with confidence and boldness, and that Christ has restored our relationship with the Father, paying the price for our sin and unholiness. Because Jesus has entered into the presence of God to make atonement for us first as our forerunner, He has opened up a new and living way to come to God (Heb. 10:20).

The reason Jesus is able to go into the presence of God is due to His status as the great high priest **“according to the order of Melchizedek,”** who was a priest and king of Salem (Gen. 14:18-20). In a similar way, Jesus is our priest and king, Savior and Lord. As a result, we have confidence and an anchor that the salvation that God has told us has been accomplished in Christ is true and reliable for us, purchased already and one day will be fully realized when we see Him face to face.

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.

NOTES

HEAD:

God has spoken by His Word. He has never changed nor will He ever change. Because He is wholly true and unchanging, He will not and cannot lie. Therefore, we can rely upon His Word. His Word enables us to trust His promises, that He will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness and that He will be our God and we will be His people.

How can you be more careful about representing the truth of God in this world?

HEART:

The God of all truth has written His Word upon our lives. We have the hope of Christ written upon our hearts, and this hope enables us to stand firm in our faith, believing that Jesus is the only way of salvation. Whoever places their trust in Christ has this Word written upon their hearts, which gives them the certain hope that Christ will come again to make right all that is wrong and to bring truth where there has been falsehood. Therefore, we should delight in the truth of God wherever it is spoken or displayed.

What are some ways that you can delight in the truth of God's promises?

HANDS:

Because God has placed His Spirit within us, we bear His name and represent Him to the world. Therefore, we are to imitate Him and show what He is like to those around us. Just as God never lies, we are not to speak or act in ways that are deceitful; instead, we are to speak the truth in love at all times and in all situations. This includes our proclamation of the gospel in the world.

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."³

—Edward Mote
(c. 1797-1874)

POINT 1: GOD IS TRUSTWORTHY, DEMONSTRATING HIS GREATNESS (PS. 118:8-9; HEB. 6:13-16).

+ COMMENTARY

“It should be remembered that Jesus was critical of men whose word was so unreliable that oaths were used to bolster their statements. He urged his followers to ‘let what you say be simply “Yes” or “No”’ (Mt. 5:37). There is therefore a difference between the Christian approach and the contemporary convention.”⁴

+ COMMENTARY

“The Jewish believers seem to have been wavering in their faith in God. The writer gives them two reasons for trusting God. First, he reminds them that God’s promises are unchangeable. He cites the example of God’s promise to give Abraham a son and many descendants (Gen. 14:4; 15:5-6). At times, it must have seemed to Abraham that the promise would never be fulfilled, but he maintained his faith in God and waited patiently until he received the promised son (6:13-15; see also Rom 4:17-22). Like him, these Jewish believers should continue to wait for God to deliver them in his own time. The second reason they can trust God is because he not only made a promise but underscored that promise with an unchangeable oath (6:16-17).”⁵

POINT 3: GOD IS TRUSTWORTHY, ANCHORING HIS SALVATION (HEB. 6:18B-20).

+ COMMENTARY

“Taking hold of hope is not something that we do halfheartedly. On the contrary, we must attain the hope offered to us with the strong encouragement that we receive from God’s Word. In short, God holds out to us hope and at the same time strenuously urges us to accept and appropriate it.”⁶

References

1. C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, vol. 5 (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1886), 324.
2. Nancy deClaissé-Walford, “Book Five of the Psalter: Psalms 107–150,” in *The Book of Psalms*, eds. E. J. Young, R. K. Harrison, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 864.
3. Edward Mote, “The Solid Rock,” in *Baptist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: Lifeway Worship, 2008), 511.
4. Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews*, vol. 15, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1983), 153-54.
5. Tesfaye Kassa, “Hebrews,” in *Africa Bible Commentary*, gen. ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 1524.
6. Simon J. Kistemaker and William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Hebrews*, vol. 15, *New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1953–2001), 175.

FOR LOOK,

THE DAY IS COMING

“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 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 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.



A RESCUING QUEEN

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. God's salvation comes through a timely risk (Esth. 4:13-17).
2. God's salvation comes through a timely intercession (Esth. 8:1-8).
3. God's salvation comes through a timely victory (Esth. 9:1-2).

Background Passage: Esther

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

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

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

Had the decree to wipe all of the Jews off the earth been fulfilled, God's promise to provide the Messiah through Abraham's descendants would have failed. Instead, God brought salvation to His people through Esther, who interceded for them at great risk to her own life. God would provide a greater salvation—one from sin and death—through Jesus, who interceded for us and laid down His life on our behalf.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

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.

GROUP TIME

NOTES



INTRODUCTION

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.

INSTRUCT: Invite group members to share some of their favorite movies with the group. Say: “In many great stories, whether they be movies or novels or actual history, there is a point at which all hope seems lost.” Talk about some of those examples. For example, in *The Princess Bride*, Princess Buttercup is set to marry Prince Humperdinck, Westley appears to be dead, and Inigo and Fezzik are wandering hopelessly in the woods.

DISCUSS: **What are some different ways characters in movies respond to hopeless situations?** (some rise to the challenge, finding a new strength or confidence to face the difficulty; some shrink from the seemingly impossible situation; some look to another source for hope)

TRANSITION: We are drawn to powerful stories in which a miraculous victory bests a seemingly hopeless situation. That’s no coincidence or result of great writing; we need those stories in our own lives because we want to believe there is hope in every situation. We know that sometimes the bad guys win, the innocent suffer, and evil prevails, but we desperately want to know that sometimes it all turns out all right. So we cling to the hope in our favorite stories, allowing it to remind us that hope is always a possibility.



Listen to session-by-session training every week on

Ministry Grid, Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or Lifeway’s Digital Pass:
ministrygrid.com/gospelproject | gospelproject.com/leader-training.

POINT 1

GOD'S SALVATION COMES THROUGH A TIMELY RISK (ESTH. 4:13-17).

NOTES

13 Mordecai told the messenger to reply to Esther, “Don’t think that you will escape the fate of all the Jews because you are in the king’s palace.

14 If you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will come to the Jewish people from another place, but you and your father’s family will be destroyed. Who knows, perhaps you have come to your royal position for such a time as this.” **15** Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: **16** “Go and assemble all the Jews who can be found in Susa and fast for me. Don’t eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my female servants will also fast in the same way. After that, I will go to the king even if it is against the law. If I perish, I perish.” **17** So Mordecai went and did everything Esther had commanded him.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Esther 4:13-17** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 13-14** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Sometimes we are called to take a **risk** that challenges our **faith** and our expected life path.

DISCUSS: How had Esther’s life plan reflected a careful placing by God “for such a time as this”? (Esther was an orphan in the household of Mordecai, a respected Jew in the Persian capital; because of her beauty and favor, Esther had an audience with the king; Mordecai saw the threat to their people and saw Esther’s potential influence as being crafted by God)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 15-17** commentary to emphasize that Esther’s obedience revealed that she had chosen to submit to God’s plan and respond with action, exemplifying the following doctrine (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

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 (Rom. 8:28), we trust in His promise to **fulfill** His plan, even when we do not **understand** our present circumstances.

KING AHASUERUS

King of Persia during the time of Esther, also known as Xerxes in Greek, reigning from 486-465 BC. He was the son of Darius I (the Great). He ruled over 127 provinces from India to Cush/Ethiopia (Esth. 1:1).

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.”¹

–Janice Meier

COMMENTARY

VERSES 13-14 / Of the sixty-six books in the Bible, the book of Esther seems odd. It contains no reference to God, prayer, the temple, or Jerusalem, staples of Old Testament writings. But these omissions reflect the precise setting of the story: the heroic Jews in this narrative are some 800 miles away from the land God gave them as a nation, and they probably felt 80,000 miles away from Him spiritually.

Esther was an orphan girl who had been raised by a relative, Mordecai, who had found respect and honor in the governmental offices in Susa, the capital city of the Persian Empire under King Ahasuerus (aka Xerxes). The king had been embarrassed by his queen (Esth. 1) and suffered an embarrassing defeat in fighting the Greeks.² He replaced his queen with the beautiful Esther after what appears to have been a confidence-building beauty contest for the downtrodden king (Esth. 2).

But the antagonist of the story, Haman, had a hatred that came from a long ancestry full of hatred for the Jews. He had offered his own resources to rebuild Ahasuerus's coffers in exchange for ridding the world of these Jews. When Mordecai realized what had been planned, he mourned, for it seemed certain annihilation awaited God's people. In his mourning, he also realized there was one person in a position of influence to help: Esther. Yet when he pointed out to her that she was the only Jew with access to the king, her response came from a position of fear: she would risk her own life by appearing in Ahasuerus's presence unbidden. His point was legitimate; her response was rational (Esth. 3-4).

There was no easy solution for the problem the Jews were facing. Esther's people faced annihilation if she didn't speak; she faced death if she did. On top of that, remaining silent would not guarantee Esther's safety; too many people knew of her relationship with Mordecai, and the truth of her heritage was sure to come out. Both paths seemed to end in death.

But Esther's ancestors were known for taking risks: Abraham left all he knew to follow the God who called him and blessed him (Gen. 12:1-4). Ruth remained with her mother-in-law and traveled to the territory of the Jews (Ruth 1:19). David, though anointed king, refused to kill his predecessor and instead waited for God to provide the peaceful path to the throne (1 Sam. 24:10). Risks taken in obedience to God's instructions and in light of God's promised hope are called faith.

VERSES 15-17 / Esther knew what the voice of wisdom sounded like. Mordecai had helped her grow into adulthood and find favor in the eyes of the Persian court. Mordecai's initial command for Esther to approach the king was met with resistance (4:8-12). But with his challenge in verses 13-14, she realized he was once again speaking wisdom to her—she must act.

But Esther would not act impulsively. She and her maids would fast for three days, and she asked for the support of other Jews in their own fasting. Regularly throughout the Bible, fasting and prayer are used together: Ezra (Ezra 8:23), Nehemiah (Neh. 1:4), and Daniel (Dan. 9:3), all exiles, fasted and prayed in order to seek the Lord. Esther knew the power of humble fasting and walked in obedience to the commands of the Lord.

Esther's closing words to Mordecai—**"If I perish, I perish"**—reveal her realization that she just might die for this step of faith. The risk of following God is not always safe; in fact, some of the mightiest heroes of God's story lost their lives. But the salvation that is promised through God on behalf of His committed followers always trumps the risk. When considering Esther's brave words, we also should consider that Christ knew He would have to die (Matt. 20:19; 26:2). Esther's bravery pointed to an even greater sacrifice that came through Jesus—He was willing to die and bear our sins to save us forever.

POINT 2

GOD'S SALVATION COMES THROUGH A TIMELY INTERCESSION (ESTH. 8:1-8).

NOTES

1 That same day King Ahasuerus awarded Queen Esther the estate of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. Mordecai entered the king's presence because Esther had revealed her relationship to Mordecai. **2** The king removed his signet ring he had recovered from Haman and gave it to Mordecai, and Esther put him in charge of Haman's estate. **3** Then Esther addressed the king again. She fell at his feet, wept, and begged him to revoke the evil of Haman the Agagite and his plot he had devised against the Jews. **4** The king extended the gold scepter toward Esther, so she got up and stood before the king. **5** She said, "If it pleases the king and I have found favor with him, if the matter seems right to the king and I am pleasing in his eyes, let a royal edict be written. Let it revoke the documents the scheming Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the king's provinces. **6** For how could I bear to see the disaster that would come on my people? How could I bear to see the destruction of my relatives?" **7** King Ahasuerus said to Esther the queen and to Mordecai the Jew, "Look, I have given Haman's estate to Esther, and he was hanged on the gallows because he attacked the Jews. **8** Write in the king's name whatever pleases you concerning the Jews, and seal it with the royal signet ring. A document written in the king's name and sealed with the royal signet ring cannot be revoked."

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Esther 8:1-8** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 1-4** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

God puts people in positions of **authority** and **knowledge** so that they might intercede on behalf of others in need.

DISCUSS: How did Esther and Mordecai use their knowledge and authority for God's purposes? (Esther had garnered favor from all who knew her, and specifically King Ahasuerus; with her influence, Esther was able to unseat Haman and make the king sympathetic to the cause of the Jews; Mordecai had an upstanding place in Persian society even though he was a Jew; because of his connections and relationships, he unearthed Haman's plan and was able to see a successful, albeit risky, path forward)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 5-8** commentary to emphasize the following idea (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

Esther had **favor** with the king and used it to **intercede** for her people.

COMMENTARY

VERSES 1-4 / In this passage, Haman is identified as **“the enemy of the Jews.”** The same description is used of him in 3:10; 9:10; and 9:24. He wasn’t simply a person who disliked the Jews; rather, his entire heritage, as recorded in Scripture, hated them as well. In Esther 3:1, Haman is identified as the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite. King Agag was the leader of the Amalekites at the time of King Saul, over five hundred years before Esther. God had instructed Saul to completely destroy the Amalekites for what they had done to the Israelites “when they opposed them along the way as they were coming out of Egypt” (1 Sam. 15:2). This was more than enough to start a long-lasting feud between the two peoples.

Haman’s plan to eradicate the Jews had been thorough. A day was set to destroy, kill, and annihilate all the Jews, young and old, and to plunder their possessions (Esth. 3:13). The Medo-Persian government had been established such that any royal edict could not be revoked (Esth. 1:19; Dan. 6:8,12). Because of this, the death of Haman did not undo the law he had carefully crafted. So even though Esther had exposed Haman’s plot and Ahasuerus had overseen his death, the threat to the Jewish people remained.

Yet Esther and Mordecai now had authority and influence they hadn’t had before. Ahasuerus had given Esther Haman’s estate and had given Mordecai Haman’s authority in the form of the king’s signet ring. Esther and Mordecai were serving the king personally, having revealed they were both loyal servants and Jews. But Ahasuerus still held the power, and for this reason, Esther implored his favor again. She begged the king to revoke the evil plan of Haman. Ahasuerus extended his golden scepter to her a second time (the first time accompanied her initial plea to him after her three days of fasting [Esth. 5:2]), giving honor and protection to Esther once again. But because of Medo-Persian law, revoking the edict was impossible.

VERSES 5-8 / Esther reminded the king of the favor he had for her. The Hebrew word for **“favor”** may point either to a subjective aspect (such as kindness or favor) or an objective one (like the beauty of a woman or a precious stone). Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord (Gen. 6:8), as did Moses (Ex. 33:12-13), and Joseph found favor in the eyes of Potiphar and the prison warden (Gen. 39:4,21). We know that Esther won more favor and approval from King Ahasuerus than any of the other candidates for queen (Esth. 2:17). It was this very favor that endeared Esther to the king, and it was upon this favor that she based her requests to him.

There seem to be contradicting renderings of King Ahasuerus’s response to Esther in these verses. Some think he was responding with kindness and support; others think Ahasuerus seemed a little tired of the ordeal and ready to move on. Many historical sources record Ahasuerus as being a man who made rash decisions, once having a sea punished with three hundred lashes when the bridge his army was building collapsed into it. Esther may have been aware that her husband was losing patience and needed his ego soothed. Regardless of his intent, authority was given to Mordecai and Esther to respond legally to the edict set in motion by Haman. Esther’s favor and Mordecai’s legal understanding combined to form the perfect intercession needed to save their people.

Since the edict couldn’t be overruled, a new, additional edict would need to be created to counteract it. In the verses following this passage, Mordecai used his newfound authority—the king’s ring and permission to use his name—to save the Jews. He summoned royal scribes and was careful to write the new edict in the precise language needed for each ethnic group of Jews. He sent the new instructions to all of Abraham’s descendants, scattered all over the massive Persian Empire, instructing them to prepare for battle.

POINT 3

GOD'S SALVATION COMES THROUGH A TIMELY VICTORY (ESTH. 9:1-2).

NOTES

1 The king's command and law went into effect on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month Adar. On the day when the Jews' enemies had hoped to overpower them, just the opposite happened. The Jews overpowered those who hated them. **2** In each of King Ahasuerus's provinces the Jews assembled in their cities to attack those who intended to harm them. Not a single person could withstand them; fear of them fell on every nationality.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Esther 9:1-2** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 1** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

We can find **confidence**, **power**, and **victory** in God's plan and perfect timing.

DISCUSS: 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? (wait for a group member to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 2** commentary to emphasize the following idea (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

God fights **for** us, and often He will call us to **fight** as well.

DISCUSS: How should our fighting look different from how the rest of the world fights? (we shouldn't fight battles according to our own hurt, pride, or desires; rather, we follow the Lord in His directions to stand up for truth, justice, and righteousness; we know that our struggle is against evil, not people; therefore, we fight for others to see and know Jesus; we maintain love, truth, and compassion even as we find ourselves engaged in battle; we understand that the loss of an earthly battle can lead to a spiritual victory)

COMMENTARY

VERSE 1 / Mordecai's protective edict was written precisely to offset the annihilation prescribed by Haman. It allowed Jews in every Persian city to gather together and protect themselves by using force against anyone who would cause them harm. Mordecai sent the edict on swift horseback approximately eight months before the designated day of destruction (8:10). The final verses of Esther 8 reveal the effect that Mordecai's edict had on the Jews: The Jews "celebrated with gladness, joy, and honor" (8:16), and all over Persia "gladness and joy took place among the Jews" (8:17). The timely risk by Esther and the timely intervention at Mordecai's pen had given all the dispersed Jews joy, confidence, and boldness.

Because of this timely deliverance, "many ethnic groups of the land professed themselves to be Jews because fear of the Jews had overcome them" (8:17). The Jews weren't the only exiled people group in Persia at this time. Beginning with the Assyrians and followed by the Babylonians, as cities and nations were conquered, their inhabitants were transported to different areas in order to quell future rebellions. Like the Moabitess Ruth, who chose to adopt the people, homeland, and God of her mother-in-law, Naomi (Ruth 1:16-17), some of the neighbors of the Jews saw their faith and how their God had provided salvation to them. The same can be true for believers today. As we walk in confidence because of our knowledge of the Lord and share our hope for the future in Christ, others will see, hear, and believe.

Mordecai's edict went into effect the very day that Haman's destruction had been arranged. No preemptive strikes were allowed; the Jews had permission to defend themselves on exactly the day they would be attacked. And throughout Persia, the "**Jews overpowered those who hated them.**" This was a total change of outcome—those who had hoped to overpower the Jews instead were overpowered by the Jews.

The word translated "**hoped**" in verse 1 is rich. It can mean to inspect, examine, wait, or hope. The imagery is of carefully looking at something, as when Nehemiah examined the broken-down walls in Jerusalem (Neh. 2:13,15). It's the same word used in Psalm 119:166: "LORD, I hope for your salvation and carry out your commands." This godly hope is based not in desire or in selfish expectation, but in the careful examination of something and finding confidence in something solid. The enemies of the Jews, however, hoped in Haman's plan, and it let them down. The Jews hoped in the Lord for their salvation, and He is faithful.

VERSE 2 / The Jews were ready to fight, and they weren't called to fight alone. In each province, they assembled in their cities "**to attack those who intended to harm them.**" Glory to God for giving us fellow believers to come alongside and fight with us. Throughout their heritage, the Israelites had long known that the Lord would fight for them (Ex. 14:14; Deut. 1:30; 20:4). And though there were times when God alone fought on behalf of His people (2 Kings 19:35), more often than not, the people also were called to fight. Particularly in Joshua and the conquests of David, we see that God led His people to fight for the victory He had already promised (Josh. 10:25). Nehemiah also challenged the returning Israelites to fight for their families and homes even as God was fighting for them (Neh. 4:14-20). And when God's people fight as He has directed, they find victory. On the thirteenth day of the month Adar, "**no one could stand against the Jews; fear of them fell on every nationality.**"

For Christians today, our fighting looks a little different, but we are still called to fight the good fight of faith (1 Tim. 6:12). Our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against evil (Eph. 6:12). Because of that, we take the armor of God and fight daily, courageously, faithfully, and dependently, knowing that God directs our battles and has promised the victory in His time.

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:

A blessing of being in small groups is the sharing of prayer requests and interceding for one another before the throne of grace. Many times our prayers focus on our own desire for safety: good health, safe travels, comfortable homes, etc. But Esther's story reminds us that God's goal is not for our safety but for His glory and our good. And that can come through a great risk to our normalcy, our comfort, our safety net, or our situation. As a group, don't be afraid to encourage one another to take the risk of faith when God's plan requires that giant leap.

Where might God be calling you to take a risk in His name today?

HEART:

The word "fear" appears five times in the book of Esther: the queen was overcome with fear (4:4); Mordecai didn't tremble in fear at Haman's presence (5:9); fear of the Jews overcame other people groups (8:17); and fear fell on the enemies of the Jews (9:2) and Mordecai (9:3). Fear is highly motivating and causes us to step away from God's plan for our lives when we fear people, situations, or dangers more than we fear the Lord. We are wise to check our own hearts: What fear is compelling me here? Am I responding in the fear of the Lord or fear of something else?

What fears holding you back from walking in confident obedience to the Lord will you confess to Him today?

HANDS:

When first approached by Mordecai about taking a stand for the Jews, Esther felt that her hands were tied. However, Mordecai helped her to see that God had placed her in that perfect time and place for His people. For each of the followers of Jesus, we see that the same is true of our own lives—we have come to our positions in life for such a time as this. Our jobs, our finances, our homes, our talents, our knowledge, and all that we have and are can be used for God's work in our world if we are willing to follow His call.

What aspects of your life will you use to help others and glorify God in this season?

NOTES

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."³

—John Stott (1921-2011)

POINT 1: GOD'S SALVATION COMES THROUGH A TIMELY RISK (ESTH. 4:13-17).

+ COMMENTARY

"In this passage we see an interesting study of character traits of the main personalities in the story. Mordecai's courageous non-conformity needs to be repeated by men today. Romans 12:2 commands, 'Be not conformed to this world.' Mordecai was one of those who had courage to resist the popular patterns of action and stand by his convictions. The arrogant vindictiveness of the politician, Haman, is another study in character, warning us against the folly of egotism . . . The quiet and humble bravery of Esther is the highlight of the story . . . How often God may bless a person with opportunity for one reason—so he may use that opportunity for God."⁴

+ OPTIONAL TEACHING ACTIVITY

Give each learner a piece of copy paper and a pen. Instruct them to spend about five minutes making a brief timeline of their lives, beginning with their birth date and ending with today's date. Encourage them to include any monumental moves, celebrations, tragedies, opportunities, and loss. Be sure to complete your own life timeline as they work on theirs.

Ask if anyone knows about Elisabeth Elliot. She was the wife of Jim Elliot, a missionary who was killed by the people he was trying to reach for Christ. Most people know that part of the story, but there is much more to her life. In fact, her life timeline is found online here: <https://elisabethelliot.org/about/timeline>. Share the link with learners and invite them to look at Elisabeth's timeline. Say: "According to her website, the resounding theme of Elisabeth Elliot's life was the boundless love of Jesus, and her greatest commission was to tell others of His saving grace" (<https://elisabethelliot.org/about>). Point out that she lived her life with much risk, choosing to go to a place in which she and her husband would not be particularly safe and even choosing to return to that place with her young daughter after her husband's death.

As a group, consider how the events in Elisabeth's life—both good times and bad—provided her the opportunity to share Jesus with others. Say: "We are no different from Esther or Elisabeth. Every item on our timeline has led us to who and where we are today and opens up the opportunity to faithfully serve God through our lives."

POINT 2: GOD’S SALVATION COMES THROUGH A TIMELY INTERCESSION (ESTH. 8:1-8).

+ COMMENTARY

“The king knew, and informed the queen, that, according to the constitution of the Persian government, the former edict could not be revoked (v. 8): What is written in the king’s name, and sealed with the king’s ring, may not, under any pretence whatsoever, be reversed. This was a fundamental article of their magna charta, that no law or decree, when once it had passed the royal assent, could be repealed or recalled, no judgment vacated, no attainder reversed, Dan. 6:15. This is so far from bespeaking the wisdom and honour of the Medes and Persians that really it bespeaks their pride and folly, and consequently their shame. It is ridiculous in itself for any man, or company of men, to pretend to such an infallibility of wisdom as to foresee all the consequences of what they decree; and therefore it is unjust, and injurious to mankind, to claim such a supremacy of power as to make their decrees irrevocable, whether the consequences prove good or bad.”⁵

+ OPTIONAL TEACHING ACTIVITY

As a group, consider the different aspects of Esther and Mordecai’s lives that led them to the place where they had the opportunity to intercede for their people. For example, Esther had an audience with the king and she had favor with many people in authority. Mordecai, with an entirely different skill set, had been promoted because of his understanding in helping the Persian crown, had a strong grasp of how to write laws, and was wise in leading others.

Say: “Each of us, just like Esther and Mordecai, have a skill set that is meant to benefit this church and this class.” Engage a few learners in sharing what they know, skills they have, and life experiences that they use for the benefit of your church. Point out that there are several lists of spiritual gifts in the Bible: 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; Ephesians 4:11-13; Romans 12:6-8. Help learners understand that there are certain aspects of Christianity we are all expected to do (obey; share the gospel; help the needy; serve others), but we also have a particular gifting from the Holy Spirit in certain areas. Those are our spiritual gifts.

Ask: “Has anyone ever taken a spiritual gifts assessment? What did you discover about God’s work in your life?” If your church uses a spiritual gifts assessment, have that resource available for any who have not taken it. Otherwise, print out or point learners to the free spiritual gifts test at this link: <https://www.lifeway.com/en/articles/women-leadership-spiritual-gifts-growth-service>.

POINT 3: GOD'S SALVATION COMES THROUGH A TIMELY VICTORY (ESTH. 9:1-2).

+ COMMENTARY

“The Jews of all the provinces, having had ample time to prepare themselves, ‘gathered themselves together in their cities,’ as the day fixed by the first edict approached (Esther 9:2), and made their arrangements. Their ‘enemies’ no doubt did the same, and for some time before the 13th of Adar two hostile camps stood facing each other in each of the great towns throughout the empire. Mordecai’s position at the capital being known, and his power evidently established, the Persian governors of all grades understood it to be their duty to throw their weight into the scale on behalf of the Jews, and lend them whatever help they could (Esther 9:3).”⁶

+ OPTIONAL TEACHING ACTIVITY

Ask: “Does anyone know how the Jewish people remember this victorious story today?” (They celebrate the Festival of Purim.) Use the following link to explain how Purim is celebrated: https://www.chabad.org/holidays/purim/article_cdo/aid/1362/jewish/How-to-Celebrate-Purim.htm.

Take note that the festival is intentionally prepared and celebrated to commemorate the story: the book of Esther is read aloud, they give to the needy, they send food gifts to others, they enjoy a feast, they say special prayers, and sometimes they even dress in costume. Before the feast of Purim, they read about Amalek, Haman’s ancestor, and some fast to remember Esther’s fasting before entering the presence of the king. Say: “The Jews remember that they faced annihilation, yet they remember it with solemn prayers, fasting, celebration, helping, and joy!”

Challenge learners to consider a difficult time in their own lives. Ask: “How do you look back at that time? Can you see the hand of the Lord with you? Can you see a victory that came out of it? Do you push those memories aside or do you intentionally bring them up and choose to commemorate them?” Encourage learners to consider celebrating the feast of Purim or to start taking time to remember their own difficult times that turned into a display of God’s perfect plan and power. They may want to journal their memories, write a prayer or poem to be read as a memorial, or gather with others who journeyed with them through that season. Whatever the means of celebration, remind learners to focus on God’s faithfulness and power in their lives, both in the past and in the present.

References

1. Janice Meier, “The Role of Queen Esther,” *Biblical Illustrator* (Spring 2004): 22.
2. Joshua J. Mark, “Xerxes I,” *World History Encyclopedia*, March 14, 2018, https://www.worldhistory.org/Xerxes_I.
3. John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 281.
4. Russell H. Dilday Jr., “Esther,” in *The Teacher’s Bible Commentary*, eds. H. Franklin Paschall and Herschel H. Hobbs (Nashville, TN: B&H, 1972), 266.
5. Matthew Henry, “Commentary on Esther 8,” *Matthew Henry Commentary*, June 9, 2022, https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/mhc/Est/Est_008.cfm.
6. H. D. M. Spence-Jones, ed., *Esther, The Pulpit Commentary* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909), 155-56.

AN INTERCEDING CUPBEARER

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. Success in the Lord's mission is based on His lasting promises (Neh. 1:8-11).
2. Success in the Lord's mission is based on His abundant provision (Neh. 2:1-10).
3. Success in the Lord's mission is based on His unstoppable power (Neh. 2:15-20).

Background Passage: Nehemiah 1-7

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

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

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

Nehemiah brought the people together to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem so that the city might be protected from their enemies. But that protection was not permanent. Through Jesus's death and resurrection, God made a way for His people to be protected from the enemies of sin and death without end.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

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

GROUP TIME

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

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.

INSTRUCT: Ask learners to consider the preparation, both physical and mental, that goes into taking a big trip.

DISCUSS: What are some difficulties of packing for various types of trips? (for a camping trip, one must consider creature comforts, such as tents, pads, bags, backpacks, and the proper shoes and gear; for international travel, the focus is on currency, passports, and navigating a new and foreign place; with any long trip, the consideration of leaving home behind—with responsibilities for animals, utilities, plants, and more—also adds to the regular packing and preparation)

TRANSITION: Nehemiah seemed to be living a pretty great life. The exiled Hebrew had proven himself to be a trustworthy servant to the king of Persia and so lived a life of privilege, likely without a care to his shelter, food, or protection. But as stories often go, one day everything changed. No longer could Nehemiah simply sit in his comfortable life and pretend he didn't know what was going on in the place he longed to call home. The physical and spiritual health of his people was in shambles, so he desired to take a trip home. But beyond making his list and considering how to leave his life behind, he also needed to consider how his request would honor both his God and his king.

POINT 1

SUCCESS IN THE LORD'S MISSION IS BASED ON HIS LASTING PROMISES (NEH. 1:8-11).

NOTES

8 Please remember what you commanded your servant Moses: “If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples. **9** But if you return to me and carefully observe my commands, even though your exiles were banished to the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place where I chose to have my name dwell.” **10** They are your servants and your people. You redeemed them by your great power and strong hand. **11** Please, Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant and to that of your servants who delight to revere your name. Give your servant success today, and grant him compassion in the presence of this man. At the time, I was the king’s cupbearer.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Nehemiah 1:8-11** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 8-10** commentary to highlight Nehemiah’s prayer for himself and his people (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

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.

DISCUSS: How might this doctrine change the way you view prayer? (prayer isn’t primarily giving a list of needs and wants to God but a way to bow before the Almighty God of heaven and earth in order to seek His face and know His will; as God changes us in prayer, we are ready to respond in faith)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 11** commentary to emphasize the following idea (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Knowing God’s **identity** and promises, we rely on Him to give us **success** in His **plan**, no matter the circumstances.

DISCUSS: What parallels do you see between Nehemiah’s situation and Esther’s situation? (both had personal access to a Persian king; both realized the need for God’s intervention; both realized they would need to risk their standing in the palace and perhaps their lives in order to obey God)

TRANSITION: Nehemiah’s burdens were for his people in Jerusalem. Praying to the Lord, he understood that only with God could there be success and relief.

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.”¹

—D. L. Moody (1837-1899)

COMMENTARY

VERSES 8-10 / It was 586 BC when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, who in turn fell to the Medo-Persians. But this new political power was actually a benefit to the Jews, for the Persian rulers were much more sympathetic with their Babylonian-captured Jewish exiles and willing to let them return home. Beginning in 538 BC, the Jews were allowed to start going back to their homeland, and not long after that, they began to rebuild the temple. Ezra joined the group in 458 BC, eighty years after the first exiled Jews had returned.

Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem in 445 BC. He and Ezra overlap in the overarching story of the returning Jews, which explains why these two books were combined into one (“Ezra–Nehemiah”) until they were divided in the third century for the Christian Bible. We’re not sure who the author was, but we see this recurring theme: God had not abandoned His people; He had provided the path for them to return to Jerusalem.

But the Israelites hadn’t changed their stripes much in the thousand years since God brought them out of Egypt. Infighting, persecution from outside forces, and disobedience were recurring themes even for the returning captives. On top of that, the approximately one-thousand-mile distance separating Persia and Jerusalem made it difficult to communicate, encourage, and support.

Nehemiah’s brother arrived from Jerusalem with a depressing report: the remnant was “in great trouble and disgrace” (Neh. 1:3). Upon hearing the walls were broken down and the gates burned, Nehemiah sat down and wept, mourning for a number of days, fasting and praying (1:4). In almost a century since the captives first went back to Jerusalem, all the progress seemed undone. When he finally found the faith and hope to lift his eyes to heaven, Nehemiah prayed to the Lord, leaning heavily on His promises. He identified the Lord as “the great and awe-inspiring God

who keeps his gracious covenant” (1:5) and confessed the sins the people had committed against this great, faithful, and loving God (1:6-7). We see Nehemiah’s humility in asking the Lord to remember His promise to Moses: If they lived disobediently, He would scatter them. And He did. But if they would return and choose to live obediently, He would bring them back **“to the place where I chose to have my name dwell.”** That place was Jerusalem. Nehemiah knew it was important that God’s people inhabit it. He also focused on God’s people, calling them **“your servants and your people,”** but he couldn’t forget that God Himself redeemed them.

VERSE 11 / After focusing fully on God’s identity, faithfulness, power, promises, and mercy, Nehemiah next made his pleas: First, that God would be attentive to his prayer and the prayers of all His people, again restating their utter dependence on the Lord. Second, Nehemiah lifted his voice in petition: **“Give your servant success today, and grant him compassion in the presence of this man.”**

Only after the prayer does the first-time reader realize how heavy Nehemiah’s burden was—he was the king’s cupbearer. The Persian king during Nehemiah’s life was Artaxerxes, son of Xerxes (called Ahasuerus in Esther). As cupbearer, Nehemiah not only would have chosen the king’s drink but also would have tested it to assure him that it was not poisoned. Only a person of the highest trustworthiness and respect would even be considered for such a position.

Nehemiah asked simply for **“compassion”** in the king’s presence. He based his prayer on the promises of the Lord. He confessed the sins of his people and their ancestors, recognizing that only God’s tender mercies brought Nehemiah to a position of influence and access to the king. Only the God of compassion and mercy had power over this situation.

POINT 2

SUCCESS IN THE LORD'S MISSION IS BASED ON HIS ABUNDANT PROVISION (NEH. 2:1-10).

NOTES

1 During the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was set before him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had never been sad in his presence, **2** so the king said to me, “Why do you look so sad, when you aren’t sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart.” I was overwhelmed with fear **3** and replied to the king, “May the king live forever! Why should I not be sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins and its gates have been destroyed by fire?” **4** Then the king asked me, “What is your request?” So I prayed to the God of the heavens **5** and answered the king, “If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor with you, send me to Judah and to the city where my ancestors are buried, so that I may rebuild it.” **6** The king, with the queen seated beside him, asked me, “How long will your journey take, and when will you return?” So I gave him a definite time, and it pleased the king to send me. **7** I also said to the king, “If it pleases the king, let me have letters written to the governors of the region west of the Euphrates River, so that they will grant me safe passage until I reach Judah. **8** And let me have a letter written to Asaph, keeper of the king’s forest, so that he will give me timber to rebuild the gates of the temple’s fortress, the city wall, and the home where I will live.” The king granted my requests, for the gracious hand of my God was on me. **9** I went to the governors of the region west of the Euphrates and gave them the king’s letters. The king had also sent officers of the infantry and cavalry with me. **10** When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard that someone had come to pursue the prosperity of the Israelites, they were greatly displeased.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Nehemiah 2:1-10** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 1-4** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Nehemiah understood the significant **burden** of his task, but God provided the **perfect** opportunity to present it to the king.

DISCUSS: How has God miraculously opened the door to a conversation or situation in your own life? (wait for a group member to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 5-10** commentary and **PACK ITEM 2: THE RETURN MAP** to emphasize the following idea (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

God proved Himself **faithful** to Nehemiah by providing an abundance of **provision** so that he could carry out his calling.



COMMENTARY

VERSES 1-4 / Nehemiah's kinsman arrived in chapter 1 with the sobering news about Jerusalem in the month of Chislev (1:1), which corresponds with November/December on our calendar. But the scene we see in chapter 2 doesn't occur until the month of Nisan (2:1), which corresponds with March/April. The chronicler didn't explain the delay of several months between Nehemiah's receiving the news and presenting his concern to King Artaxerxes. Bible scholars have suggested the king may have stayed in Babylon during the winter rather than spending it in Susa, where Nehemiah was stationed. Or Nehemiah may have waited in order to bring his request to the king during a time of feasting, which occurred in the spring.²

However, there was another matter of historical significance that may have played into Nehemiah's delay: Artaxerxes himself was the very king who had ordered that the rebuilding of Jerusalem be halted, for the king had heard tell of the Israelite uprisings and rebellions (Ezra 4:17-23). So Nehemiah, being knowledgeable of this not-too-distant history and the formalities of the Persian court, had much to consider in how and what to ask of the king.

But obviously, Nehemiah's inner turmoil was becoming physically manifest, for when the cupbearer brought the wine to Artaxerxes, the king identified his **"sadness of heart"** immediately. We see here that the hand of the Lord was moving in the Persian king without even a word passing from Nehemiah's lips. What better chance for Nehemiah to present the situation of his people to the most powerful ruler of the land than when the king himself asks about it?

In response to the king's observation, Nehemiah was **"overwhelmed with fear."** But he recognized the great and awesome hand of the Lord in his situation and found the courage to describe the problem: the city of his ancestors was in ruins and the gates had been destroyed. The king, with his

heart pricked, invited Nehemiah to present his request. Again, knowing God was in control and relying on His power, Nehemiah prayed before making his request.

VERSES 5-10 / Nehemiah first asked to be sent to Judah to help rebuild the city where his **"ancestors are buried."** Some Bible commentators have observed that Nehemiah intentionally avoided the use of the name "Jerusalem," for that might have brought to mind Artaxerxes's halt on the rebuilding there. But many cultures of that time fixed great importance upon burial places of their ancestors, so this emphasis would have carried weight with the king.³

Artaxerxes was agreeable not only to sending Nehemiah but to going without his trusted cupbearer for an extended period of time, likely years. Nehemiah gave the king a definite time frame for his absence, possibly as much as twelve years (Neh. 5:14). Yet **"it pleased the king"** to send him.

Gaining more courage, seeing he found favor with God and with the king, Nehemiah also requested letters of protection during his travel and a letter granting him permission to access the wood in the king's forest to rebuild the gates, walls, and homes. Again, Artaxerxes was agreeable and granted his requests. Nehemiah knew that it wasn't because of the character of the king that his requests were affirmed but because **"the gracious hand of my God was on me."**

So Nehemiah went on his way with the favor of God and the Persian king and with a military escort. With the king's permission, he notified the governors, including Sanballat and Tobiah, who were against the Jews and their rebuilding, that he was to have safe passage and be royally supplied in the Jewish rebuilding of their city.

Glory to the Lord when we find favor in His eyes and the eyes of others to give us the provisions and the smooth passageways we need to accomplish His will.

POINT 3

SUCCESS IN THE LORD'S MISSION IS BASED ON HIS UNSTOPPABLE POWER (NEH. 2:15-20).

NOTES

15 So I went up at night by way of the valley and inspected the wall. Then heading back, I entered through the Valley Gate and returned. **16** The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, for I had not yet told the Jews, priests, nobles, officials, or the rest of those who would be doing the work. **17** So I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in. Jerusalem lies in ruins and its gates have been burned. Come, let's rebuild Jerusalem's wall, so that we will no longer be a disgrace." **18** I told them how the gracious hand of my God had been on me, and what the king had said to me. They said, "Let's start rebuilding," and their hands were strengthened to do this good work. **19** When Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard about this, they mocked and despised us, and said, "What is this you're doing? Are you rebelling against the king?" **20** I gave them this reply, "The God of the heavens is the one who will grant us success. We, his servants, will start building, but you have no share, right, or historic claim in Jerusalem."

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Nehemiah 2:15-20** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 15-18** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

Nehemiah **carefully** obeyed the Lord's instructions. His **encouragement** and story led others to rebuild the wall.

DISCUSS: What are some tasks God may call us to for which we might feel **incapable?** (take missionary journeys; make job changes; pursue being a foster family; financially support a cause)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 19-20** commentary to emphasize the following idea (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

In the face of **opposition**, we find our holy **position** in God alone.

DISCUSS: What are some Scriptures that might help us when we find **ourselves facing opposition?** (Jesus told us we would have suffering in the world but that He has conquered it [John 16:33]; God is with us, strengthening us and holding us [Isa. 41:10]; we need not be anxious but present our requests to God through prayer [Phil. 4:6-7], those who look to the Lord are radiant with joy and their faces are never ashamed [Ps. 34:5])

COMMENTARY

VERSES 15-18 / Nehemiah and his caravan made it to Jerusalem, and after three days he decided to inspect the city for himself. In the midst of this description of the different areas of the city, the directions he traveled, and the details of his inspection, we must not miss one detail: God had laid it on Nehemiah's heart to help Jerusalem (Neh. 2:11-14). That passion and focus was the driving force and the inspiration behind everything he did. Intentionally, God had specifically entrusted Nehemiah with the task of rebuilding Jerusalem.

What skills did this cupbearer have in wall building and defensive strategies against Jerusalem's enemies? We're not sure; maybe none. But we can observe several things about Nehemiah. First, he was discreet. Though his arrival by military escort with regal instructions no doubt attracted the attention of people who would not wish the Jews well, he arrived in Jerusalem and laid low for three days. And when he deemed the time was right to make his inspection, he took only a few men and one animal for riding (v. 12). Next, we see that Nehemiah was intentional. He recorded the exact path he took, noting even where the terrain was too filled with rubble to continue riding and he had to walk instead. Finally, we see that he was a leader and not a follower. He hadn't asked permission of anyone in authority in Jerusalem but was acting on the leadership of the Lord to make his inspection. These qualities, coupled with faith in God's path, qualified him for the position.

When Nehemiah returned from his nighttime inspection, he had seen for himself that the report from his kinsman was correct: Because of the broken walls and burned gates, the Jews were in great trouble and disgrace (1:3). So Nehemiah gathered the Jews, priests, nobles, officials, and the others who would do the work and summoned them to **“rebuild Jerusalem's wall, so that we will no longer be a disgrace.”**

The spiritual implication of the condition of Jerusalem's walls pointed to the neglect and apathy of the faith of its inhabitants. But Nehemiah would not let their lazy faith prevail. In his encouragement to rebuild the wall, he told them how God's hand had been on him and what the king had said to him. God's power had been manifested in Nehemiah's own heart and in the response of King Artaxerxes. This testimony inspired the Jews and they agreed to rebuild and **“their hands were strengthened”** to do the work.

VERSES 19-20 / Were this a story for young children, it might end here with the words “And they worked hard, built the wall, and all their dreams came true.” That ending might be sentimental, but it's hardly real life. Even when we're on the right path, even when we're walking in obedience, and even when the hand of the Lord is mighty and His power is evident in what we're doing, we will still know opposition and hardship.

The names Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite had already been mentioned (2:10). In verse 19, another name is added: Geshem the Arab. Tobiah is described as an “official,” so it is likely these men had governing responsibilities. They may have felt threatened by Nehemiah and his rebuilding plans, fearing that they might lose their standing if the Jews found success. They may have been mistrustful of Nehemiah's intentions. They simply may have not wanted the Jews to return for any reason. For whatever reason, they **“mocked”** Nehemiah and his compatriots, accusing them of rebelling against the king of Persia.

Though Nehemiah had every legal right and Persian authority to be where he was and to be doing what he wanted, he didn't appeal to those standards. Instead, he appealed to the highest authority—**“the God of the heavens.”** Nehemiah had confidence and calling directly from God alone.

MY RESPONSE

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

NOTES

HEAD:

Nehemiah knew that walls were integral to the lasting protection and confidence of the Jews. And though the rest of the book of Nehemiah will focus on Nehemiah's mission to rebuild those walls, even the strongest walls on earth can never last forever. Only the Lord is our lasting rock, fortress, deliverer, refuge, shield, and stronghold (Ps. 18). Just as walls defended the ancient people, Jesus is our strong—and lasting—wall against sin and death. In our lifetime, we'll see that everything else we depend on—relationships, finances, jobs, community, and more—will crumble like an old wall. But we can find confidence that Jesus will always be with us.

What are you doing to build up the walls of your faith? Where do your walls need repair?

HEART:

We read this story and find ourselves in one of two camps: either we know God's calling for this season of our lives or we feel disconnected from His plan for us. If God has brought you insight for your next step of faith, fill your mind and heart with Him: His love, power, holiness, and righteousness will be your stronghold as you navigate the tricky waters of walking by faith. If you are unsure of your next step, recommit your heart to Jesus, seeking His glory as you live a worshipful life and walk in obedience.

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:

In his encouragement to rebuild the wall, Nehemiah told the people how God's hand had been on him and what the king had said to him. His testimony inspired the Jews and they agreed to help rebuild the walls. Our testimonies of God's faithfulness matter. Whether it's a story of how we came to know the Lord or of how He provided in a certain situation, if we don't share stories of God and His work and character, how will others know?

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."⁴

—Kathleen Nielson

POINT 1: SUCCESS IN THE LORD'S MISSION IS BASED ON HIS LASTING PROMISES (NEH. 1:8-11).

+ COMMENTARY

“He is empty-handed, but not uninvited. He knows the threats and promises of Scripture well enough to make a strong, not a tentative plea. He draws on several passages of Deuteronomy (cf. verse 8b with Deut. 28:64; verse 9 with Deut. 30:1–4 and Deut. 12:5). Most significantly in verse 10 he quotes the words in which Moses had pleaded for Israel on mount Sinai (Deut. 9:29), that God would stand by his own (thy servants and thy people) and by the work he had so strenuously begun. At that point Israel had been threatened with extinction; now, it seems, Nehemiah sees the situation as hardly less perilous. Like Moses, he must stand in the breach with his intercession.”⁵

+ OPTIONAL TEACHING ACTIVITY

Before digging into Point 1, say: “I’m going to read to you some famous promises made by presidents of the United States. See if you know who said each of these.” Read aloud the following: “I shall go to Korea” (Eisenhower). “I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the Earth” (Kennedy). “I have a secret plan to end the war” (Nixon). “I will never lie to you” (Carter). “We did not—repeat, did not—trade weapons or anything else for hostages, nor will we” (Reagan). “Read my lips; no new taxes” (George H. W. Bush). “The era of big government is over” (Clinton).⁶

Lead a brief discussion of the reliability of human promises. Even if the person is honest and intends to follow through, no person has the power to guarantee a promise fulfilled. Say: “However, God’s promises are different. He is almighty, all-knowing, and transcends time. He has the authority and power to guarantee His promises.” Invite a few volunteers to share some of their favorite promises from Scripture.

Encourage learners to start a journal of God’s promises. As they read the Bible or spend time studying it in their private worship time, they can write those promises in their journals and pray through them regularly. You may want to help them get started with a few of the more famous promises of God and Jesus: He is with us (Isa. 43:2; Josh. 1:9; Ps. 23:4); He will take care of us (Matt. 6:31-33; Prov. 3:5-6); and He is our salvation (John 14:6; 8:12).

POINT 2: SUCCESS IN THE LORD'S MISSION IS BASED ON HIS ABUNDANT PROVISION (NEH. 2:1-10).

+ COMMENTARY

“Note Nehemiah’s prayer in 2:4. The king notices that Nehemiah is sad in his presence, which was a breach of protocol. Kings liked to be surrounded by happy people. This could have caused Nehemiah to lose his job or even his life. Some think that he deliberately staged this sadness, in light of his prayer in 1:11. Or, I think that his request in 1:11 was a daily prayer for four months, but on this particular day, Nehemiah inadvertently let his sorrow over Jerusalem show on his face, leading to this encounter. The gravity of his situation is seen in that he was ‘very much afraid’ (2:2). It was the opportunity that he had been waiting for, but when it actually came, he was terrified.”⁷

+ ILLUSTRATION

Before delving into Nehemiah 2:1-10, engage learners in considering all that Nehemiah would have been thinking about in the time that passed between receiving the news about Jerusalem and when he actually presented his plan to the king: Was it really Nehemiah’s place to go? Would someone else do a better job? If he were to, when? How would he get there? Who would provide the supplies and money? How would they be protected? Point out that we, like Nehemiah, often face many questions and considerations in making a big decision.

Say: “However, God opened the door for Nehemiah by making King Artaxerxes aware of his countenance; the king himself sought the request of his trusted cupbearer.” Explain that sometimes we get so worked up in the details of a situation that we don’t consider simply asking. You might show the 2:12 clip titled “You Just Asked For It?” from *The Bourne Identity* (<https://www.wingclips.com/movie-clips/the-bourne-identity/you-just-asked-for-it>). If you don’t have the capability to show the clip, you could describe it: An undercover agent needs some important information from a hotel and enlists a close friend to get it for him. He gives her specific instructions: memorizing a telephone number and exits, counting her steps and the number of people in the room, and other tedious details. He almost panics when she doesn’t follow his plan exactly, but she appears outside with the exact information he needed without doing any of the tedious work—she simply asked the desk clerk for it and he gave it to her.

Point out that in addition to simply asking people in authority for a blessing or favor, we sometimes also neglect to ask God. Invite a few volunteers to read the following verses aloud from their Bibles: Jeremiah 29:12; Romans 12:12; Proverbs 15:29; Romans 8:26; and James 4:2-3.

POINT 3: SUCCESS IN THE LORD'S MISSION IS BASED ON HIS UNSTOPPABLE POWER (NEH. 2:15-20).

+ COMMENTARY

“Once again we see Nehemiah preparing himself for the task at hand. He goes on this night ride, this secret reconnaissance, and he keeps to himself what God put into his heart to do for Jerusalem. That phrase in verse 12 about God giving him these ideas sheds light on the relationship between Nehemiah’s prayers and his plans. Nehemiah understood God’s will, and here he indicates that he is doing what the Lord has led him to do. Nehemiah’s statement in verse 16 about the people ‘who would be doing the work’ shows that he does not expect to accomplish this great task alone. Nehemiah knows that he needs the people of God to accomplish the will of God. So having studied the Bible, prayed, and acted, now Nehemiah will summon others to join him in pursuing God’s kingdom. Nehemiah calls his kinsmen to the task in verses 17–18. He begins with the sorry state of God’s kingdom on earth in verse 17 . . . God’s name is at stake in Jerusalem! And Jerusalem is rubble. For those who love God’s name, this is intolerable. Nehemiah is compelled to act, and he is compelled to call others to join him.”⁸

+ ILLUSTRATION

Enlist a volunteer who considers himself or herself to be quite observant. Ask him several questions about the morning of your class, including but not limited to: What time did you get up this morning? What was the temperature this morning? How long, exactly, does it take you to get here? Who all did you speak to as you walked through the building? What time did we actually begin class? If he can’t answer every question, that’s fine.

Point out that we have varying levels of natural observation skills, but we can most certainly develop how we pay attention to people and things, especially if we consider how we may bless others and glorify God through our observation. Point out that Nehemiah removed the distraction of a crowd and chose to make his trip around Jerusalem with only a few people and one animal. In doing so, he got an accurate look at the wall and the condition of the city because he was able to focus and observe.

Say: “We can do the same inside and outside our church. As we greet people, we can notice their demeanor and see how we can celebrate with them or pray for them. In class, we can listen carefully to what others say, supporting them in prayer and helping them by meeting needs. In the community, we can be on the lookout for needs that our church or our group can meet, and taking steps to help connect those people to the resources we might provide.” Engage learners in considering other ways we can carefully observe our world and use our findings to help others.

References

1. D. L. Moody, “Prevailing Prayer,” in *The D. L. Moody Collection*, ed. and comp. James S. Bell Jr. (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1997), 253.
2. Carl R. Anderson, “Nehemiah,” in *CSB Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2017), 721-22, n. 2:1-3.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Kathleen Nielson with D. A. Carson, *Rebuild: A Study in Nehemiah* (Nashville, TN: LifeWay Press, 2014), 36.
5. Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, vol. 12, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979), 86.
6. “10 Famous Presidential Promises,” CNN, February 4, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2012/08/22/politics/gallery/presidential-promises/index.html>.
7. Steven J. Cole, “Lesson 2: The Realities of Serving God (Nehemiah 2:1-20),” Bible.org, June 10, 2022, <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-2-realities-serving-god-nehemiah-21-20>.
8. James M. Hamilton Jr., *Exalting Jesus in Ezra–Nehemiah*, *Christ-Centered Exposition* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2014) [Logos].

A PROCLAIMING PRIEST

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. God's people gather to hear the Word of the Lord (Neh. 8:1-8).
2. God's people display the joy of the Lord (Neh. 8:9-12).
3. God's people unite to obey the commands of the Lord (Neh. 8:13-18).

Background Passages: Ezra 7-10; Nehemiah 8

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

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

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

When God's people heard the reading of His Word, they confessed their sins and committed to obeying God's law in response. The people, however, would fail to obey God as they had promised. Jesus is the Word of God who takes away our sin, gives us His righteousness, and changes our hearts so we can obey God.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

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.

GROUP TIME

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

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?

EXPLAIN: Share the memory of a project you began, including how long you thought it would take and how much you thought it would cost. Explain briefly any trouble you experienced, extra expenses incurred, and how the setbacks affected other parts of your life.

DISCUSS: **What are some ways you respond when you face setbacks in a project?** (wait for group members to respond)

TRANSITION: God's people had been working hard and fighting their enemies—often at the same time. Their struggles had worn them down. But then something happened that changed everything: they heard the Word of the Lord. We might take God's Word for granted in our lives today, with multiple Bibles in every Christian home. But the returning exiles saw God's Word differently—it was precious. We would be wise to learn from today's narrative that God's Word is reason enough to pause from our work, listen with care, and consider the condition of our hearts and lives.

OPTIONAL QUESTION: **How does Scripture change us?** (it gives us peace; it gives us instruction to act; it helps us not fear or worry; it brings us joy in the knowledge of God; it gives us encouragement in sorrow)

POINT 1

GOD'S PEOPLE GATHER TO HEAR THE WORD OF THE LORD (NEH. 8:1-8).

1 [A]ll the people gathered together at the square in front of the Water Gate. They asked the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses that the LORD had given Israel. **2** On the first day of the seventh month, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly of men, women, and all who could listen with understanding. **3** While he was facing the square in front of the Water Gate, he read out of it from daybreak until noon before the men, the women, and those who could understand. All the people listened attentively to the book of the law. **4** The scribe Ezra stood on a high wooden platform made for this purpose. Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah stood beside him on his right; to his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam. **5** Ezra opened the book in full view of all the people, since he was elevated above everyone. As he opened it, all the people stood up. **6** Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and with their hands uplifted all the people said, "Amen, Amen!" Then they knelt low and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. **7** Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, and Pelaiah, who were Levites, explained the law to the people as they stood in their places. **8** They read out of the book of the law of God, translating and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was read.

READ: Because of the names, read aloud **Nehemiah 8:1-8** yourself for this point.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 1-4** commentary to highlight how God's Word is our authority (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

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.

DISCUSS: What are some ways we submit to the authority of God's Word? (read the Scriptures; listen to faithful preaching; share it with others; obey it)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 5-8** commentary to emphasize the following idea (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Those who **hear** the Word of the Lord are **humbled** and worship God.

NOTES

THE BOOK OF THE LAW OF MOSES

Read on scrolls, the Torah, or Pentateuch, included the first five books of our modern-day Bible. These books were written by Moses under the inspiration of God: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

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."¹

—John Stott (1921-2011)

COMMENTARY

VERSES 1-4 / Every now and then, a congregation is blessed with a faithful, encouraging leader who serves that church for decades. That was Ezra. He had come to Jerusalem from Babylon approximately a dozen years before Nehemiah brought his own caravan. But Ezra's reputation had preceded him: "Ezra had determined in his heart to study the law of the LORD, obey it, and teach its statutes and ordinances in Israel" (Ezra 7:10). We see here the description of a believer who is fully committed to the Lord: head, heart, and hands focused on Him, willing to study, willing to let the Word change his heart, and then choosing to pass on God's wisdom and instructions to others.

It's not certain whether Ezra remained in Jerusalem after his initial journey or he returned at a later date. But in these verses, the stories of Ezra and Nehemiah overlap, and we are blessed to see how two people—one a bookworm and a teacher, one a leader and an administrator—work together, using their complementary skills to lead God's people to obedience.

Building the wall had been a hard-fought battle, but we read in Nehemiah 6 that the wall was completed in 52 days (6:15). When their enemies heard the news, "all the surrounding nations were intimidated and lost their confidence," not because they thought the Jews were mighty but because "they realized that this task had been accomplished by our God" (6:16).

The people then gathered in Jerusalem, safe and secure, and asked Ezra to bring God's Word out before them. Ezra may have been the only person in Jerusalem at that time who had access to a copy of God's law, and it wouldn't be a stretch to imagine that this treasured parchment had come with him thirteen years earlier. We can only imagine Ezra's joy that the sacred Word of the Lord was now being requested by the people. Not only that, but **"all the people listened attentively."**

We see it intentionally recorded that **"the men, the women, and those who could understand"** were there from daybreak until noon, perhaps six hours of intense listening. This united, multi-generational congregation had likely never known such a time of public reading, as they had all been born into exile. Their desire to hear and know God's Word revealed their heart to align themselves with their God.

VERSES 5-8 / We read that Ezra opened the book, but if your mental picture of this story contains a book similar to today's Bibles, that would be inaccurate. The Egyptians had developed the technology of using long papyrus strips, rolled after writing, hundreds of years before this time, but it was still the predominant standard for recording information.² Since he was on a raised platform, Ezra's unrolling of the scroll was visible to all, the holy act of opening the Word of the Lord inspired everyone to stand.

The Hebrew word translated **"stood up"** is rich in meaning. Besides standing physically, it can also mean to take a stand or hold one's ground, to stop, to delay or remain. The people in Nehemiah 8, then, stood in reverence and in unity before the Word of God.

After the people stood, Ezra **"blessed the LORD,"** praising Him for who He is. David did the same in Psalm 103:1-2, where he instructed his own soul to bless the Lord, and for the rest of the song, he listed the awe-inspiring holiness of Yahweh. With hands raised, the people before Ezra cried, **"Amen, Amen,"** reflecting their agreement with the proceedings. We say, "Amen," when we confirm the words of another and hope in the same truths.

Then the people bowed low, with faces to the ground, in worship, in humility. And the Levites helped explain the words to those who didn't understand. So this was not only a teaching or sermon, it was a full-body worship experience.

POINT 2

GOD'S PEOPLE DISPLAY THE JOY OF THE LORD (NEH. 8:9-12).

NOTES

9 Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to all of them, "This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people were weeping as they heard the words of the law. **10** Then he said to them, "Go and eat what is rich, drink what is sweet, and send portions to those who have nothing prepared, since today is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, because the joy of the LORD is your strength." **11** And the Levites quieted all the people, saying, "Be still, since today is holy. Don't grieve." **12** Then all the people began to eat and drink, send portions, and have a great celebration, because they had understood the words that were explained to them.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Nehemiah 8:9-12** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 9** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

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

DISCUSS: Why should conviction of sin result in our joy? (because God disciplines those He loves; our conviction is an opportunity to confess our sin and be forgiven; our conviction is an opportunity to become more like Christ, who is sinless; conviction is a grace of God by which we see our need for Jesus)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 10-12** commentary to emphasize the following idea (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

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

DISCUSS: How can we live so that our joy as believers in Christ can be seen by others for the glory of God? (our joy and peace in times of trial can encourage others; our joy and hope in the gospel should result in less worry and stress; we live in joy and celebration to show others we are waiting for the Lord)

TRANSITION: We know that in God's story, there are no coincidences. It was no coincidence that the Jews just happened to request Ezra's reading of the Word on the first day of the seventh month, and it's no coincidence that the day they heard God's law for the first time in generations was a day they were to celebrate. The holy timing of God is flawless, and we are blessed when we see His hand moving in our lives and circumstances. But God's people didn't stop their hearing of the Word at one day; they wanted to know more.

FESTIVAL OF TRUMPETS

Also called Rosh Hashanah, this feast was a time of rest and commemoration announced by the blowing of a trumpet, or shofar, and included a food offering (Lev. 23:23-25). It was celebrated in the fall to mark the beginning of a new agricultural year, as God's people remembered God's provision and were prompted to repent.

COMMENTARY

VERSE 9 / The scene of Nehemiah 8 reveals not only a body of believers but also a beautiful picture of biblical unity: young and old, men and women, leaders from every walk of life gathered as one to hear God’s Word. Nehemiah stood with the authority of the Persian crown, reminding us of the need for godly men and women in governmental service. Ezra was a priest and scribe, devoting his life to the study of God’s Word and to interceding before the Lord on behalf of the people. The Levites were different from the priests—even though all priests were Levites—in that they had responsibilities in the temple but not the intercessory ones of priests. Thirty-eight Levites had returned to Jerusalem with Ezra (Ezra 8:15-19).

We saw in verse 8 that the Levites had explained the law, translating it and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was read. Verse 9 adds that Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites all played a role in instructing the people. The root word translated **“were instructing”** in verse 9 points to separating mentally, discerning, or enabling understanding. Then as now, teachers of God’s Word must be certain that their audience hears not only the audible sound of the words but ingests their meaning and significance.

We don’t know where Ezra chose to read from God’s Word that day, but we know that it was **“the law”** of Moses and that it caused the people to weep. Likely, these exiled Jews were coming to grips with the fact that they had lived far from God’s temple and His commands, leading them to repent and mourn over their disobedience. And though godly repentance is important in the faith of one who follows the Lord, there was a significance to **“this day,”** as Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites explained—it was **“holy to the LORD.”** This day was the first day of the seventh month (8:2), which we see described in Numbers 29:1-6 as the Festival of Trumpets. On that day, God’s people were not to do any work but to offer a burnt offering and sound the trumpets. This day was not an ordinary day—it was a

festival! It was a time to celebrate the Lord, call attention to Him, and make an offering for sin.

VERSES 10-12 / How do you celebrate a milestone? Many people enjoy time with friends and a good meal, accompanied with lots of laughter and talking. That seems to encapsulate the essence of the instructions for how the Jews were to celebrate the Festival of Trumpets: **“Go eat what is rich, drink what is sweet,”** and share your extras with others. This first day of the seventh month was not a time to count calories! The menu of rich food and sweet drink may make us think of a New’s Year Eve party, which in essence it was!

Perhaps you’ve found yourself in a similar situation: You recommitted your faith or started walking in obedience, and then something came across your path—an old friend, an old journal, an old photo—and a million shames fell upon you: “I’m nowhere near where I need to be. I’m just going to fail again. Who am I fooling?” Nehemiah and Ezra would look at you and gently say, “Take today to celebrate where you’ve come, not how far it is to perfection.” We can celebrate even as we struggle because God is who we’re celebrating. He has been faithful, He has been with us, and His promises are forever. Or as the Jews were told, **“the joy of the LORD is your strength.”** When you’re feeling low in your own strength, choose to celebrate in God, our stronghold!

The Levites then **“quieted all the people”** and told them to **“be still, since today is holy.”** This wasn’t a contradiction to their encouragement to celebrate; instead, it was an encouragement to be at peace, to stop mourning, finding confidence before the Lord. So the celebration ensued **“because they had understood the words that were explained to them.”** In the same way, we can find joy in the fact that we understand the Word of the Lord and that we know the Word of the Lord—Jesus—by faith!

POINT 3

GOD'S PEOPLE UNITE TO OBEY THE COMMANDS OF THE LORD (NEH. 8:13-18).

NOTES

13 On the second day, the family heads of all the people, along with the priests and Levites, assembled before the scribe Ezra to study the words of the law. **14** They found written in the law how the LORD had commanded through Moses that the Israelites should dwell in shelters during the festival of the seventh month. **15** So they proclaimed and spread this news throughout their towns and in Jerusalem, saying, "Go out to the hill country and bring back branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees to make shelters, just as it is written." **16** The people went out, brought back branches, and made shelters for themselves on each of their rooftops and courtyards, the court of the house of God, the square by the Water Gate, and the square by the Ephraim Gate. **17** The whole community that had returned from exile made shelters and lived in them. The Israelites had not celebrated like this from the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day. And there was tremendous joy. **18** Ezra read out of the book of the law of God every day, from the first day to the last. The Israelites celebrated the festival for seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly, according to the ordinance.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Nehemiah 8:13-18** from his or her Bible.

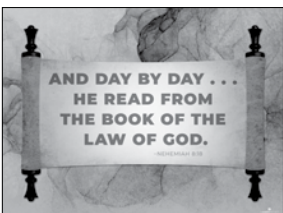
EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 13-14** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

When God's leaders take the responsibility to know and **obey** His Word, the entire community is **blessed**.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 15-18** commentary to emphasize the following idea (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

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

DISCUSS: Recall the Scripture verse on **PACK ITEM 12: READ THE BOOK**, and then ask: **What are some reasons we might fail to recognize the privilege we have to read and hear God's Word?** (as sinners, we are selfish with our time; we have never been without God's Word handy and cannot imagine what it would be like not to have God's Word available; unbelievers aren't likely to recognize the significance of God having spoken to us in His Word; we may view Scripture as just one authority among many in our lives; in our sin, we put ourselves in the seat of judgment over the validity and truthfulness of Scripture)



COMMENTARY

VERSES 13-14 / In Nehemiah 8:2, we saw that “on the first day of the seventh month,” the people requested that Ezra read the Word to them, and they had responded with contrition and celebration through observance of the Festival of Trumpets. Here, “**on the second day,**” we see that only a portion of the people assembled for a second day of reading: the family heads, priests, and Levites. This time of the year was a season of harvest, which required many hands, so the smaller gathering makes sense.³ But it’s also worth noting that each family leader, as well as each religious leader, determined to stay.

What a strong reminder to us today: leaders must assume spiritual leadership. Whether we find ourselves as heads of a household, head of a group, or head of an informal circle of friends, we must accept the position in which God has placed us and the responsibility that goes with it—to read, know, understand, and believe God’s Word.

As these leaders studied together, they found another passage that identified another celebration in the same month. On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, God’s people were instructed to celebrate the Festival of Shelters (or Tabernacles or Booths) to the Lord. In Leviticus 23:33-36,39-42, we see the details of this festival: there was a sacred assembly of complete rest on the first and eighth days, no daily work, and a food offering was presented for eight days. On the first day, while rejoicing, they built shelters from leafy trees and lived in those shelters for the seven days of the festival. Why? “So that your generations may know that I made the Israelites live in shelters when I brought them out of the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God” (Lev. 23:43). This festival looked back to God’s faithfulness and authority in the lives of His people, both at the time of Moses (1400s BC) and the time of Nehemiah (400s BC). This was a command to live out their faith, remembering God and His fulfilled promises.

Again, we can take this example and consider a similar time of remembrance in our own lives. As a family, consider God’s faithfulness to you individually, as a household, and as an extended family line. Share these stories aloud, choosing to point out God’s acts of mercy and love. Perhaps like the Jews, this would be a great yearly activity for each family.

VERSES 15-18 / Like a mother watching her preschooler willingly pick up his toys for the first time, we can only imagine the thoughts going through Ezra’s mind at this point: “They’re doing it! After all this time, they are actually obeying!” For a people starved of the Word and presence of the Lord, their hunger to know and obey was evident in their actions. For starters, they proclaimed and spread the message throughout the towns and in Jerusalem, teaching friends and relatives what was commanded, how to obey, and when the festival was to start. Like good news spreading through good friends, the united focus on God and His Word spread through the Jewish community of returned exiles.

The people didn’t just agree to or consider the instruction, they obeyed through physical work, gathering branches in the hill country and bringing them back to Jerusalem. Some made shelters on rooftops or in courtyards if they lived in the city. Others built their shelters in the public areas. Not only would this act help them remember their ancestors who had lived one thousand years before, but it would bring them out of their homes and their daily routine, allowing them to spend time together, face to face, focused on the Lord.

These shelters weren’t built for a time of hardship but for celebration: “**There was tremendous joy,**” more so than anyone could recall or find recorded. Each day of the festival was marked by the reading of God’s Word and celebration. Finally, after all their years in exile, God’s people were walking in obedience to His Word and finding the joy that comes as a result.

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.

NOTES

HEAD:

God's Word has authority, power, and reverence in our lives. Many Christians might affirm this statement mentally, but their lives are void of daily, intentional, focused Bible reading and study. Bible reading, as the Jews in Nehemiah 8 testified, is of utmost importance, but the reading itself is not simply an item to be checked off our daily to-do list. No, it's the focal point of our day, our season, and our seeking. From daily reading, we are prompted to study, memorize, apply, meditate, and regularly consider what God is saying to us.

What impact does God's Word have in your life? How do you know?

HEART:

The best stories stir up a number of emotions in us: longing, reflection, pain, joy, triumph, and more. A true interaction with the Bible does the same: we shout for joy, we weep over sin, we raise our hands in celebration, and we fall to our knees in submission. And in congregational Bible involvement, our emotional response is not muted but rather expressed in the midst of brothers and sisters hearing the same Word. Don't hold back the emotions and feelings that God's Word stirs in you. Whether individually or corporately, allow the Bible to direct, shape, and change your 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:

If you are holding a Bible in your hands right now, recognize that you are holding the Word of the Lord. Pause for just a moment and consider the weight of this statement. God's people are called to know His Word, to make His redemption story our redemption story. In the hands of God's people, the Bible is the mightiest of tools, used to encourage, uplift, chastise, help, comfort, relieve, and direct. Wielded correctly, we can use it to defend against the enemy, raise the head of the fallen, and strengthen the knees of the weak. We share it with our mouths and with our fingers at the direction and inspiration of God's Spirit.

Who in your life needs to hear the Word of God this week? How will you share it with them?

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."⁴

—Bede (c. 673-735)

POINT 1: GOD’S PEOPLE GATHER TO HEAR THE WORD OF THE LORD (NEH. 8:1-8).

+ COMMENTARY

“The people in our text were both attentive and reverent when God’s Word was read to them. Verse 3 mentions their attentiveness, and verses 5 & 6 show their reverence. They stood up as if to greet a royal visitor, and then they bowed down in worship. They were not worshipping the actual scroll that Ezra held in his hand, but rather the God who had given the words of that scroll to Moses and through Moses to them. Attentiveness stems from reverence. If we maintain our reverence for God and that fact that He is speaking to us through His Word, we will pay attention to what He says. If we forget that this is the Word of the living God to us, our minds will wander to other things. I realize that preachers can sometimes be boring. But if I lose your attention, direct your mind to the text of Scripture and ask the Lord to open it to your heart.”⁵

+ COMMENTARY

“Nehemiah did not explain exactly how Ezra and the Levites read and explained God’s ‘Law’ to this large crowd that may have numbered between 30,000 and 50,000 people (Neh. 7:66-67). Possibly Ezra read sections of the Law in the presence of ‘all the people’ (8:3), and then at certain times ‘the Levites’ circulated among them and made ‘it clear’ (pāraš, ‘to make distinct or interpret,’ possibly means here ‘to translate’ from Heb. to Aram.) and explained (gave ‘the meaning’ of) what Ezra had read as the people stood in groups (vv. 7-8). The most gratifying thing that happened, of course, is that the people obeyed God’s Word. What they heard touched their emotions, for they wept as they heard ‘the Law’ (v. 9). Apparently they were remorseful over their past disobedience to the Law and contrite over their sins.”⁶

+ ILLUSTRATION

Create the mood for Point 1 by asking: “Have you ever shown up to an event and thought, ‘Everyone is here!’ or ‘This is a much bigger crowd than I expected!’ How did you feel about that large group?” Learners may want to consider something relatively small, like a family reunion, or something large, like a concert. Show the pictures from the following website containing photos of some of the largest gatherings in history: <https://www.inproduction.net/post/a-look-at-some-of-the-largest-gatherings-in-history>. If you don’t have a way to show the photos on a large screen, send the link to learners and have them look through the images on their phones.

EXTRA

Say: “We can assume that most people didn’t realize they would be in the presence of millions of people when they decided to attend these events. But the crowds had the same purpose, the same ideals, and the same desire to attend.”

Point out that we sometimes focus on the differences we have between people, but in a corporate worship setting, we should instead be focused on our shared focus, shared worship, and shared God. As a group, consider how finding similar ground among other Christians could strengthen your congregation and devotion to the Lord. Ask: “What can we do to engage others to hear God’s Word, seek His face in prayer, and worship Him wholeheartedly?”

POINT 2: GOD’S PEOPLE DISPLAY THE JOY OF THE LORD

(NEH. 8:9-12).

+ **COMMENTARY**

“The only joy that reflects the worth of God and overflows in God-glorifying love is rooted in the true knowledge of God. And to the degree that our knowledge is small or flawed, our joy will be a poor echo of God’s true excellence. The experience of Israel in Nehemiah 8:12 is a paradigm of how God-glorifying joy happens in the heart. Ezra had read the word of God to them and the Levites had explained it. And then the people went away ‘to make great rejoicing.’ Their great rejoicing was because they had understood words—the true words of God.”⁷

+ **ILLUSTRATION**

Before digging into Point 2, say: “There are situations and circumstances that some people would consider to be always somber and always serious. A hospital ward, for instance, may seem to carry a solemn vibe. But let’s consider what might happen when someone brings some joy into a solemn room.”

Show the following 3-minute clip from the movie *Patch Adams*, in which a medical student (played by Robin Williams) chooses to start clowning around in a children’s ward:
<https://www.wingclips.com/movie-clips/patch-adams/clowning-around>.

As a group, consider some other places that are considered to be solemn or serious. (Answers may include a school, a nursing home, a funeral home, a place of business, a doctor’s or dentist’s office, etc.) Ask for a volunteer to share a time when he or she found or watched someone find joy, laughter, or humor in just such a place. Point out that some people turn to humor when they are hurting (as you can see in this Chonda Pierce article: http://chonda.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Todays_Christian_Woman.pdf).

However, there is also the option of joy. In the midst of every difficulty, we have the option to rejoice because of God. We have been told that we can find joy because we will see Jesus (John 16:22), because we have salvation through Him (Rom. 5:1-5), because God puts it in our hearts (Ps. 4:7), and because the joy of Jesus is in us (John 15:11). Enlist a volunteer to read Philippians 2:1-2 aloud from his or her Bible, and point out that we can find joy from being in the midst of like-minded believers. This is exactly what the Jews in Nehemiah 8 were experiencing.

POINT 3: GOD'S PEOPLE UNITE TO OBEY THE COMMANDS OF THE LORD (NEH. 8:13-18).

+ COMMENTARY

“Other Scripture passages indicate that the Feast of Tabernacles had been celebrated regularly (by Solomon in 2 Chr 8:13, Hezekiah in 2 Chr 31:3, Josiah in 2 Chr 35:18, and the future celebration in Zech 14:16–18). What was different? The feast had two principal meanings: (1) it was an agricultural festival to commemorate the ‘ingathering’ of the harvest (Exod 34:22); (2) it was a memorial celebration of the wilderness wanderings. Apparently through the years the harvest application had been emphasized, but the living in booths to remember the wilderness wanderings had been neglected. As the people examined Scripture here, they returned to that emphasis, which was appropriate after their new exodus in returning from the Babylonian captivity. One effect of the continued study of Scripture is that it helps us adjust our traditions according to the divine standard.”⁸

+ ILLUSTRATION

Before class, assign one or two dog-loving volunteers to read through the following website about the twenty most obedient large dog breeds: <https://www.newsweek.com/20-most-obedient-large-dog-breeds-1591598>. Explain to them that you’ll need to hear some details about ten of them, including both positive and negative characteristics of their obedience.

Divide a board into thirds using two vertical lines. Label the far left “Dog breed,” the center “Obedient,” and the far right “However.” Invite your volunteer(s) to share about the dogs she chose, giving some information as to why each breed is noted for its willingness to obey but any reasons why the obedience level might be hindered (such as size, independent streaks, or temperament). Write one-word descriptions on the board for each dog breed’s willingness to obey (under “Obedient”) and any concerns (under “However”).

Then erase all the dog breeds and replace the title of the column with “Christians.” Leave the second and third titles (“Obedient” and “However”), but erase the descriptions in the columns. Write your own name at the top of the first column list. Just like you were talking about the dogs, describe your own tendency to obey but also acknowledge your lack of obedience. (For example: “As long as everything is going well, I’m pretty much on board with following the Bible. But when I’m stressed or behind on sleep or dealing with a problem I can’t solve, I know I struggle to be kind, joyful, and loving.”)

Encourage learners to consider their own willingness to obey God’s commands as you read through the passage and commentary for Point 3. Ask: “What might we write about ourselves on this board?”

References

1. John R. W. Stott, *Culture and the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979), 12.
2. “Book publishing,” *Britannica*, June 11, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/publishing/Book-publishing>.
3. Carl R. Anderson, “Nehemiah,” in *CSB Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2017), 732, n. 8:13.
4. Bede, *On Ezra and Nehemiah*, ed. Scott Degregorio (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), 195.
5. Steven J. Cole, “Lesson 8: Spiritual Renewal (Nehemiah 8:1-18),” *Bible.org*, June 11, 2022, <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-8-spiritual-renewal-nehemiah-81-18>.
6. Gene A. Getz, “Nehemiah,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, vol. 1, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1983), 689.
7. John Piper, “Truer Knowledge Brings Greater Joy,” *Desiring God*, June 11, 2022, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/truer-knowledge-brings-greater-joy>.
8. Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, vol. 10, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 1993), 230.

A CONFESSING COMMUNITY

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. Confession begins with a proper view of God (Neh. 9:5-8).
2. Confession acknowledges the reality of sin (Neh. 9:16-21).
3. Confession humbly seeks pardon and restoration (Neh. 9:32-35).

Background Passage: Nehemiah 9–10

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

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

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

Nehemiah confessed the sins of God's people, trusting the Lord to respond according to His righteousness and faithfulness. When we confess our sins and trust in Jesus, we have confidence that God responds by providing forgiveness and eternal life with Him.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

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.

GROUP TIME

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

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.

EXPLAIN: Share something in your life you put aside knowing you'll need to attend to it soon. (For example: cleaning baseboards or rugs, purging junk from the basement, weeding the garden, or gathering tax documents) Engage a few learners to consider things they set aside for a while knowing they will be on the forefront at some point soon.

DISCUSS: **When you know a task is waiting, how do you feel knowing you need to finish the job?** (tired; stressed; anxious; worried; lazy; determined; diligent)

TRANSITION: The exiled Hebrews who had returned to Jerusalem had begun to recommit their lives to the Lord. In chapter 8, we saw how they sought to hear and understand God's Word. They began to celebrate God's prescribed feasts. And though they paused their acknowledgment of sin in order to be obedient to enjoy and remember during the Festival of Shelters, it was now time to back up and re-address their sin.

POINT 1

CONFESSION BEGINS WITH A PROPER VIEW OF GOD (NEH. 9:5-8).

5 Then the Levites—Jeshua, Kadmiel, Bani, Hashabneiah, Sherebiah, Hodiah, Shebaniah, and Pethahiah—said, “Stand up. Blessed be the LORD your God from everlasting to everlasting.” Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise. **6** You, LORD, are the only God. You created the heavens, the highest heavens with all their stars, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to all of them, and all the stars of heaven worship you. **7** You, the LORD, are the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans, and changed his name to Abraham. **8** You found his heart faithful in your sight, and made a covenant with him to give the land of the Canaanites, Hethites, Amorites, Perizzites, Jebusites, and Girschites—to give it to his descendants. You have fulfilled your promise, for you are righteous.

READ: Because of the names, read aloud **Nehemiah 9:5-8** yourself for this point.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 5-6** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

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

DISCUSS: Who has God shown Himself to be thus far in our study of the storyline of the Bible? (God is the almighty and sovereign Creator of everything; the Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love; the Lord is a faithful and caring provider; He is a deliverer; the Lord forgives; He is a covenant-keeping God; the Lord is truthful and cannot lie)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 7-8** commentary to emphasize the following idea (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

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

DISCUSS: Looking back at your own life, in the good and the bad, what are some reasons you can say, “God is faithful”? (wait for a group member to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion)

TRANSITION: The Jews had come with the intent to confess sins, but they knew that the proper perspective was imperative. God is perfectly holy, loving, and powerful, and He holds all authority. We lift our voices to praise His name, and we choose to see His faithfulness, leading us to thank God and confess our sin.

NOTES

UR OF THE CHALDEANS

Possibly a city on the Euphrates River, this was where Abram lived until God called him to leave to go to Canaan (Gen. 11:31) as part of God’s covenant to make him a great nation (Gen. 12:1-3).

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.”¹

—Tony Evans

COMMENTARY

VERSES 5-6 / A quick glance back to the beginning of Nehemiah 9 reveals that this gathering of the returned Hebrews in Jerusalem was in the same month they had come together for the reading of the law (Neh. 8:1-2). But this congregational gathering was because they were ready to confess. Their inward desire for repentance was expressed in their outward expressions: fasting, wearing sackcloth, and dust on their heads (Neh. 9:1). The foreigners had been dismissed, not out of malice or national pride but because they likely still worshiped other gods. So the gathered descendants of Abraham stood, heard the words of the law (v. 3), and verbally confessed “their sins and the iniquities of their ancestors” (v. 2). Though this generation of Jews had not committed the sins of the generations before them, they stood where they were—subservient, rebuilding the shell of their formerly glorious city—because of the lingering effects of the unfaithful Hebrews who had preceded them.

But confession to God and worship of God go hand in hand (Neh. 9:3). Even when the guilt of our sin is great, we must begin our confession with a proper view of God. The Levites and other respected leaders began by telling the people to stand up to worship and acknowledge the Lord. First, they acknowledged that He is **“from everlasting to everlasting,”** an exact phrase used by David (Ps. 41:13). After acknowledging God’s eternal nature, the focus turned to His **“glorious name.”** The Israelites blessed the name of the Lord, exalting it with **“all blessing and praise.”** The name of the Lord is a reflection of all He is. When we praise the name of the Lord, we glorify Him for who He is comprehensively: all-knowing and still merciful, omnipotent and compassionate, holy and willing to dwell with us.

The Jews then began their prayerful song, turning their attention to God’s power and creativity while establishing His authority and indescribable control over all that exists. God’s authority over the heavens,

earth, and seas, as well as His power to maintain all life that exists within them, reveals His sovereignty and wisdom.

VERSES 7-8 / Once their minds and hearts were focused on God’s incomparable identity, they turned their attention to His actions throughout the history of the Israelites. Like the famous quote, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,”² Jewish history can point to a similar truth: Those who forget the sins of the past may commit them just as their ancestors did. The Levites tried to help the people remember their history.

God called Abram out of Ur of the Chaldeans, promising to make him into a great nation, blessing him as well as all others on earth (Gen. 12:1-3). And as the Levites proclaimed, it was God who chose Abram, brought him out of the pagan people, and changed his name as his faithful heart was revealed.

God also made a covenant with Abraham, giving him the land that was occupied by a variety of other nations. God’s promise to Abraham revealed not only His power to shape history but also His long-reaching plan. Abraham would never see the day that he would occupy the land as its owner. Instead, he spent his days as a stranger and foreigner, just like the next two generations, living in tents but trusting in the promise that the land would belong to their people (see Heb. 11:8-10).

The time that lapsed between God’s promise to Abram and the actual conquest of that land by Joshua was around six hundred years! During that time, God’s people had been to Egypt as slaves and back, wandered in the desert for forty years for their unfaithfulness, and finally were able to dwell in the land God promised them. The Levites summarized it perfectly: **“You have fulfilled your promise, for you are righteous.”** So now, with eyes clearly focused on the Lord, worship and confession began.

POINT 2

CONFESSION ACKNOWLEDGES THE REALITY OF SIN (NEH. 9:16-21).

NOTES

16 But our ancestors acted arrogantly; they became stiff-necked and did not listen to your commands. **17** They refused to listen and did not remember your wonders you performed among them. They became stiff-necked and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt. But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love, and you did not abandon them. **18** Even after they had cast an image of a calf for themselves and said, “This is your god who brought you out of Egypt,” and they had committed terrible blasphemies, **19** you did not abandon them in the wilderness because of your great compassion. During the day the pillar of cloud never turned away from them, guiding them on their journey. And during the night the pillar of fire illuminated the way they should go. **20** You sent your good Spirit to instruct them. You did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and you gave them water for their thirst. **21** You provided for them in the wilderness forty years, and they lacked nothing. Their clothes did not wear out, and their feet did not swell.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Nehemiah 9:16-21** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 16-18** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

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

DISCUSS: How should we view our sin in light of the character and actions of God? (the more we see God’s goodness and faithfulness on display in His Word and our lives, the more egregious our sin should become in our eyes; sin against God is folly and nonsensical when we understand God as our Creator and Sustainer; the evil of sin becomes apparent when we recognize God’s grace to us)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 19-21** commentary to emphasize the following idea (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

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

TRANSITION: In the wilderness, God was both merciful in not abandoning the Israelites and just in that the unfaithful died without seeing the promised land. God would continue to reveal judgment mixed with mercy for generations to come, including in the exile and the return to the promised land.

COMMENTARY

VERSES 16-18 / Verses 9-15 serve as a summary for us, recalling God’s faithfulness to the descendants of Abraham as recorded in the book of Exodus. A glance through these verses reveals a pattern—every clause has the word “You” as the subject: You saw the oppression, You performed signs and wonders, You divided the sea, and many more. Looking back through the lens of time past, these worshipers could see that God was intimately present in everything that happened to their people at what many considered to be the most pivotal time of their history.

Verse 16, however, begins with one of the most jarring words in the English language: “But.” The Levites placed it perfectly at the beginning of verse 16 to contrast the faithful, steadfast, perfect love and leadership of God with the faithless actions of Abraham’s descendants: **“But our ancestors acted arrogantly . . . and did not listen to your commands.”**

Looking back at the actions of our own ancestors, we aren’t usually quick to make judgments. Rather, we excuse them, saying that times were different, situations were extreme, and the world was a different place. But we serve a God who does not change, and neither do His standards—sin at the time of Babel is still sin today. Arrogance is always arrogance. So as we consider generational sin, we should consider not society’s standards and situations but God’s perspective. We have been given the clear instruction for thousands of years to love the Lord and love others. If our family members didn’t live up to that standard, we can honestly say, as the Levites did, that they were stiff-necked and disobedient.

The ancient Israelites didn’t lack for knowledge. Moses always taught them exactly what God had said. The problem was that they lacked obedience, refusing to listen to God and to remember His wonders done on their behalf. Their unbelief led them to faithless sin, to appointing a leader to

take them back to the slavery of Egypt, to making an image of a calf, and to committing **“terrible blasphemies.”**

There’s a second “But,” though, almost hidden in the middle of verse 17: **“But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love.”** First appearing in Exodus 34:6, this was God’s description of Himself to Moses. It was repeated several times in the Psalms (86:15; 103:8; 145:8) and some of the prophets (Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). In spite of their stiff-necked rebellion, God was still gracious, still compassionate, still slow to anger. He was also still judge—still holy and still demanding holiness. But God’s slow fuse revealed His patient mercy on His people even as they snubbed their noses at Him.

VERSES 19-21 / Beginning at the first words of verse 19, the attention turns back to the Lord. Just as the Levites had recognized His faithfulness in verses 9-15, they picked up with the **“you”** statements again, recounting God’s faithful acts: You did not abandon them, You sent Your good Spirit, You did not withhold Your manna, You provided for them. God generously gave all this compassion, love, leadership, and provision even as His people were attempting to go back to their land of slavery and give credit to a handmade golden calf.

As with the Israelites, God’s Spirit is a valuable resource that we take for granted as well. The Holy Spirit was not with every follower of God in those days; that is a post-Jesus blessing. But God had given His Spirit to instruct them, which would have helped them to believe and obey. On top of that, they passively observed the decades-long miracles before their very eyes: their clothes lasted forty years in the wilderness and their feet did not swell. God provided for His people as He still does today, and sometimes like the Israelites, we take it for granted, ignoring Him, leading us into sin that we must confess and repent from.

POINT 3

CONFESSION HUMBLY SEEKS PARDON AND RESTORATION (NEH. 9:32-35).

NOTES

32 So now, our God—the great, mighty, and awe-inspiring God who keeps his gracious covenant—do not view lightly all the hardships that have afflicted us, our kings and leaders, our priests and prophets, our ancestors and all your people, from the days of the Assyrian kings until today.

33 You are righteous concerning all that has happened to us, because you have acted faithfully, while we have acted wickedly. **34** Our kings, leaders, priests, and ancestors did not obey your law or listen to your commands and warnings you gave them. **35** When they were in their kingdom, with your abundant goodness that you gave them, and in the spacious and fertile land you set before them, they would not serve you or turn from their wicked ways.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Nehemiah 9:32-35** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 32-33** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Confession requires a humble **agreement** on our part that we have sinned and **earned** God's righteous discipline and judgment.

DISCUSS: How do humbling circumstances serve the purpose of bringing God's people to confession of sin? (hardships and trials can force us to reckon with the consequences of our sin; hitting bottom reminds us of our dependence on God; humbling circumstances reminds us we need God's mercy and grace)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 34-35** commentary to explain what repentance entails by contrast with the arrogance and pride of Israel's ancestors (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

ASSYRIAN KINGS

Multiple Assyrian kings threatened both Israel and Judah at various times: King Pul (2 Kings 15:19), King Tiglath-pileser (2 Kings 15:29), King Shalmaneser (2 Kings 17:3), and King Sennacherib (2 Kings 19:36). In 722 BC, the Assyrians defeated the Northern Kingdom of Israel in Samaria and took them into captivity and exile.

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 (Ps. 119:57-60). It is the human counterpart to God's work of regeneration; in other words, the human side of our **conversion**.

COMMENTARY

VERSES 32-33 / In the verses preceding this passage, we see another summary, starting with the conquest in the book of Joshua and recounting the books of history and most of the prophets. The cycle of God's people in all these books follows this pattern: 1) They walk close to God; 2) they turn from God and toward idolatry; 3) God turns them over to their enemies; 4) they finally call out to God, repent, and He delivers them. Start over at step one, repeat for seven hundred years, and that's basically what verses 22-31 reveal: a cycle of sin, repentance, and deliverance.

God had warned (v. 29), God was patient (v. 30), and He sent prophets and the Spirit (v. 30). After so much rejection though, He decided it was time to turn them over to their enemies for exile. But He still didn't completely abandon them—a testimony to His grace and compassion (v. 31). But then verse 32 begins with the words **“So now,”** signaling that the Levites were wrapping up their time of worshipful confession, focusing again then on God.

In recounting their history, the people saw that God is a great, mighty, awe-inspiring, covenant-keeping God and that they weren't, so they confessed their sin. Confession is like a deep-cleaning. When we finally purge sin from our life, we are able to clearly see God and how He has acted in power, love, and faithfulness toward us.

As the humbled group of God-worshippers bowed before their awe-inspiring God, they asked for mercy once more: **“Do not view lightly all the hardships that have afflicted us.”** In other words, please consider our punishment to be full because it's touched us all, from the highest to the lowly. Every descendant of Abraham had been touched by the judgment of God. They had been conquered, been exiled, and endured much suffering. But it worked. They had turned back to God. They saw His righteousness in the midst of their wickedness, and now their hearts were once again obedient.

VERSES 34-35 / Humbled confession agrees with God and gives Him the authority to determine right and wrong. Humbled confession never makes excuses, points fingers, or shifts blame to another. Humbled confession acknowledges sin honestly but still professes hope for tomorrow because of our faithful, merciful God.

The summary of the short-lived nation of Israel is brief in verse 34: In essence, everyone—kings, priests, and people—disobeyed God. Though occasionally a leader would come into power who would lead them to turn back to God, the conviction was not lasting. Once Joshua, David, Asa, or Hezekiah died, the people revealed that they weren't following God but only His appointed leader. And even with the **“abundant goodness”** and **“spacious and fertile land”** given by the Lord, Abraham's descendants did not turn from their wicked ways because their hearts were hardened and they did not believe. This, of course, is the opposite of repentance, which includes turning from sin to love and serve the living God who has blessed us chiefly in the gift of His Son, Jesus, for our salvation from sin.

If we peek ahead one more verse, we see the cumulative effect of Israel's rebellion: **“Here we are today, slaves in the land you gave our ancestors”** (Neh. 9:36). Basically, the Nehemiah-led Jews realized all the blessings they'd been given at the hand of the Lord and saw clearly that they had squandered them. Though the remnant had returned and God would never completely abandon His people, they were being ruled by a foreign power, and they knew they would never be the same.

But God always keeps His promises. He promised to make Abraham into a great nation and to be a blessing to all peoples on earth through his descendants (Gen. 12:1-3). As with the promised land, this didn't happen in Abraham's lifetime, but the seed of Abraham saw the fulfillment of that unbelievable covenant when Jesus was born.

MY RESPONSE



PACK ITEM 13: REPENTANCE AND FAITH: Hand out copies of this bookmark to help remind your group of the meaning and intent behind our repentance.

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:

Knowing God is the first step in any kind of worship. In order to enter His presence and seek His face, we must know Him in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24). The guilt of our sin may draw us to confession, but we must always be aware of who we are approaching: Jesus, “the Holy One of God” (John 6:69). We come to know God daily through Bible study, for it is through His Word that He has revealed Himself to us through Jesus (John 17:6). As we know and see God clearly, our sin and need for repentance becomes evident and visible.

How are you getting to know God better through your study of God’s Word?

HEART:

We need not shy away from the feelings that sin brings. It is the Holy Spirit who convicts the world about sin (John 16:8), and since He is the Counselor (John 16:7), we can trust that our feelings that accompany that conviction will draw us closer to God and allow the process of healing and restoration to begin. However, we must also be aware that the Spirit’s conviction is not accompanied by condemnation if we are followers of Christ (Rom. 8:1). Jesus Himself was our sin offering, so our sin cannot condemn us. We should celebrate the desire to confess our sins, understanding that it’s the power of the Spirit within us that draws us to that acknowledgment.

What sins do you need to confess to the Lord, knowing there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus?

HANDS:

Keeping up an image of super-faith is exhausting—and false. None of us has a handle on every sin. Each time we feel we’ve conquered one, another will grow bigger muscles and pull us down. There is freedom in sharing our struggles and weaknesses with brothers and sisters in Christ who are also brave enough to admit their struggles. Even Paul—yes, the very one who took the gospel to the world—said, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—and I am the worst of them” (1 Tim. 1:15). He didn’t say that he was the worst but that he is the worst.

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.”³

—Frederick Temple
(1821-1902)

POINT 1: CONFESSION BEGINS WITH A PROPER VIEW OF GOD (NEH. 9:5-8).

+ COMMENTARY

“In Nehemiah 9:6–37 we get the content of the way the people made confession and worshiped the Lord. What we have here in this passage is the fullest summary of the storyline of the Old Testament in the Old Testament . . . It’s as though Nehemiah is giving us a biblical theological summary of the Old Testament. This passage is full of phrases from earlier parts of the Bible. Nehemiah here retells the story of the Old Testament. He has selectively and strategically chosen what to include, referencing earlier parts of the Old Testament by using key phrases from those passages, adding some new material of his own, and thus re-presenting the whole of the Old Testament story.”⁴

+ ILLUSTRATION

Before starting Point 1, spend a few minutes sharing how your eyesight has changed over the years. Enlist a few volunteers to share the things they’ve done to help their eyesight: glasses, contact lenses, cataract surgery, corrective surgery, and beyond. Engage those volunteers to share how bad vision affects their lives, from driving to reading to working and more.

Say: “You may not believe me, but in a pinch, there’s actually a quick way to see things clearly when you don’t have your glasses with you.” Show the following video, which explains how making a small circle with your hand forces what you’re seeing to be clear: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OydqR_7_DjI.

Help learners take this illustration one step further by asking: “How might we see some spiritual truths from this talk about seeing clearly?” Point out that we are called to know God, seeing Him as He really is. Say: “There are a lot of false teachings about God in the world, but just like looking through a small circle you make with your hand, there’s a way to get a clear, focused picture of God: looking at Him accurately through His Word.”

Explain that just as we struggle to see with the physical eye when there is too much to take in, we sometimes struggle to view God properly when there are too many distractions in our world. Encourage learners to set aside time for private Bible study and worship that is silent (or as close to silent as they can manage), whether that’s in the early morning before anyone else is awake, in a room alone, or perhaps even in your car during your lunch break.

POINT 2: CONFESSION ACKNOWLEDGES THE REALITY OF SIN (NEH. 9:16-21).

+ **COMMENTARY**

“In this solemn and impressive prayer, in which they make public confession of their sins, and deprecate the judgments due to the transgressions of their fathers, they begin with a profound adoration of God, whose supreme majesty and omnipotence is acknowledged in the creation, preservation, and government of all. Then they proceed to enumerate His mercies and distinguished favors to them as a nation, from the period of the call of their great ancestor and the gracious promise intimated to him in the divinely bestowed name of Abraham, a promise which implied that he was to be the Father of the faithful, the ancestor of the Messiah, and the honored individual in whose seed all the families of the earth should be blessed . . . They confess their numerous and determined acts of disobedience. They read, in the loss of their national independence and their long captivity, the severe punishment of their sins. They acknowledge that, in all heavy and continued judgments upon their nation, God had done right, but they had done wickedly.”⁵

+ **ILLUSTRATION**

Bring a disposable plastic water bottle to class and be drinking it throughout the lesson. As you get to the start of Point 2, hold up the water bottle and say: “Has anyone ever thought about the environmental impact of plastic water bottles? My one bottle here in my hand may not be a problem, but let’s consider the real impact of bottle upon bottle upon our environment.”

Be ready to share some information from the following website that describes the pollution caused by plastic water bottles: <https://healthyhumanlife.com/blogs/news/plastic-water-bottle-pollution-plastic-bottles-end>.

Here are some of the key points:

- Only one in six bottles is recycled.
- It takes three times the amount of water in a bottle to make the bottle.
- It takes almost 2,000 times the energy to make a bottle of water as it does to produce tap water.
- Each week, 40,000 18-wheeler trucks are used just to deliver water.
- It takes up to 1,000 years for a single water bottle to decompose, leaking chemicals as it does.

Say: “Seeing the dangers of disposable water bottles clearly, I may rethink my decision to buy these. I should stop buying these, buy a reusable bottle, and refill it with water from the tap. When considering sin, we might make the comparison to this disposable water bottle: One sin doesn’t seem like that big of a deal to us. But one sin leads to more sin that leads to more sin in our lives and the lives of our family, polluting our lives and our faith.”

POINT 3: CONFESSION HUMBLY SEEKS PARDON AND RESTORATION (NEH. 9:32-35).

+ COMMENTARY

“When confessing our sins, it is good to notice the mercies of God, that we may be the more humbled and ashamed. The dealings of the Lord showed his goodness and long-suffering, and the hardness of their hearts. The testimony of the prophets was the testimony of the Spirit in the prophets, and it was the Spirit of Christ in them. They spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost, and what they said is to be received accordingly. The result was, wonder at the Lord’s mercies, and the feeling that sin had brought them to their present state, from which nothing but unmerited love could rescue them.”⁶

+ ILLUSTRATION

Ask: “Has anyone ever restored a piece of furniture?” Invite one or two volunteers to share the different steps necessary to take an old, seemingly valueless piece of wood and restore it to function and value.

As a group, consider the different steps for refinishing furniture found at this website: <https://www.homedepot.com/c/ah/how-to-refinish-furniture/9ba683603be9fa5395fab90140efad1a>.

The steps include cleaning, examining for repairs, removing the old finish, sanding, stripping with chemicals, sealing, staining or painting, and finishing. Point out that restoring a piece of furniture requires time, hard work, a careful eye, and willingness to peel back layers that have been added over time.

Say: “Our confession and restoration can feel like furniture refinishing. First, we’ve got to be able to admit that we are in need of repair or refinishing. We need deep cleansing and a careful assessment to see what damage has been done. After that, the difficult work begins: the scraping away of the habits of sin in our lives. This is the slow part; it doesn’t happen overnight. We allow God to strip away the ingrained sin that has stained us, and we are willing to endure the sometimes painful process so that we can get back to the genuine creation God made us to be. Once we’re to that point, we don’t want to go back to our old ways, so we consider the paint or stain that will protect us: spiritual disciplines such as Bible study, prayer, fellowship, Scripture memory, and solitude are a great place to start.”

References

1. Tony Evans, *The Power of God’s Names* (Nashville, TN: Lifeway Press, 2014, reprinted 2021), 37.
2. George Santayana, *The Life of Reason* (New York: Scribner’s, 1905), 284.
3. Frederick Temple, *Sermons Preached in Rugby School Chapel in 1858, 1859, 1860* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1861), 289.
4. James M. Hamilton Jr., *Exalting Jesus in Ezra–Nehemiah, Christ-Centered Exposition* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2014) [Logos].
5. Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, vol. 1 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 299.
6. Matthew Henry, “Nehemiah 9,” *Matthew Henry’s Bible Commentary (concise)*, June 13, 2022, <https://www.christianity.com/bible/commentary/matthew-henry-concise/nehemiah/9>.

A BURDENED PEOPLE

+ SESSION OUTLINE

1. The sins of the wicked incur their guilt (Mal. 3:7-12; Jas. 2:10-11).
2. The boasting of the wicked reveals their shamelessness (Mal. 3:13-15).
3. The fear of the Lord among the righteous prompts His compassion (Mal. 3:16-18).

Background Passages: Malachi; James 2

+ WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

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

+ HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

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. Christ was provided to cover our shame and set us free from the penalty of sin.

+ HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

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.

GROUP TIME

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

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?

EXPLAIN: Share a little about the town, city, or countryside in which you grew up. Explain how it impacted your young life and when you left. Share how the town has or hasn't changed, and speak of the memories that come back when you visit it. (If you still live in the same town, enlist a learner to share this trip down memory lane.)

DISCUSS: **How do our memories, connections, and fondness for a place change the longer we're away from it?** (sometimes we grow fonder, and we forget the difficulties; sometimes we have no real desire to return, particularly if the people who made the place special are no longer there; in either case, we lose the connection when we leave and rarely return)

TRANSITION: We may have moved away from a hometown, family, or sentimental place, but the Israelites had moved away from God. They had left Him emotionally and spiritually, long before He allowed their enemies to conquer them. They then spent decades and generations physically away from Jerusalem, knowing their sin had brought them to exile. And when they were allowed to return, the spiritual leaders realized they were still far, far away from the Lord. Their hearts were so hardened, they didn't even feel the guilt of their sin. The prophet Malachi's words spoke to them, and to us, about the impact and effects of sin on our faith and our relationship with the Lord.

POINT 1

THE SINS OF THE WICKED INCUR THEIR GUILT (MAL. 3:7-12; JAS. 2:10-11).

NOTES

TITHE

The Old Testament mentions three tithes, or an offering of a tenth:

- 1) The Levitical tithe (Num. 18:21,24) was given to the Levites and priests as support for their service.
- 2) The tithe of the feasts (Deut. 14:22-27) was an annual family contribution to enjoy in God's presence in worship or celebration.
- 3) The tithe for the poor (Deut. 14:28-29) involved a tithe every third year to support the poor.

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?"¹

—Richard Baxter
(1615-1691)

Malachi 3:7 "Since the days of your ancestors, you have turned from my statutes; you have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD of Armies. Yet you ask, "How can we return?" **8** "Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing me!" "How do we rob you?" you ask. "By not making the payments of the tenth and the contributions. **9** You are suffering under a curse, yet you—the whole nation—are still robbing me. **10** Bring the full tenth into the storehouse so that there may be food in my house. Test me in this way," says the LORD of Armies. "See if I will not open the floodgates of heaven and pour out a blessing for you without measure. **11** I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not ruin the produce of your land and your vine in your field will not fail to produce fruit," says the LORD of Armies. **12** "Then all the nations will consider you fortunate, for you will be a delightful land," says the LORD of Armies.

.....
James 2:10 For whoever keeps the entire law, and yet stumbles at one point, is guilty of breaking it all. **11** For he who said, Do not commit adultery, also said, Do not murder. So if you do not commit adultery, but you murder, you are a lawbreaker.

READ: Ask two volunteers to read aloud **Malachi 3:7-12** and **James 2:10-11** from their Bibles.

EXPLAIN: Use the **MALACHI 3:7-12** commentary to highlight the realities of guilt and shame that accompany our sin (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

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 (Matt. 5:21-22; Jas. 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.

DISCUSS: How does God use guilt and shame to draw us back to Himself? (the Holy Spirit lets us know we are not right with God when we experience guilt and shame; guilt and shame due to our sin are meant to lead us to repentance and restoration; guilt and shame can help us see God's grace all the more)

EXPLAIN: Use the **JAMES 2:10-11** commentary to emphasize the following idea (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

We all fall short and are **guilty** of breaking God's law, whether in big or small ways. Therefore, we are deserving of God's **judgment**.

COMMENTARY

MALACHI 3:7-12 / The prophet Malachi is one of the most wonderful mysteries in the Old Testament. We know nothing about this man's background, but we do know that God is the predominant speaker in this book, and His direct quotes fill almost every verse. So though we consider Malachi to be a prophet, he was almost like a reporter, making sure we know exactly what it was God was saying to His people.

The focus of his book as a whole was that God's people weren't seeking Him, weren't hearing Him, and weren't responding to Him. Their faith was dead and empty. And because of that, their sins against one another were many and their lives were falling apart. It was into this very situation that Ezra, and later Nehemiah, arrived, as Malachi wrote his words just before they reached Jerusalem. As we step into Malachi 3, we see some promises from God: He was sending a messenger, the day of the Lord will come, and His judgment will fall. But the people did not fear God, and they held no reverence or hope or praise for the Lord who never changes and who continues to show mercy to the descendants of Jacob (Mal. 3:1-6).

Verse 7 opens with an indictment: the Israelites had always turned from obedience to God. But then God gave His promise: **"Return to me, and I will return to you."** Beautiful. God is ever loving, ever forgiving, ever gracious. But like a rebellious child, the people of Judah harshly spurned God's promise and instead asked questions that had been answered long ago: **"How can we return?"** God had clearly spelled out what it meant to return to Him in Isaiah 44:22 and Jeremiah 4:1; 24:7. He had made the same plea in Zechariah 1:3. Returning to the Lord meant humbly repenting of sin and living in obedience from the inside out because of His holiness and sovereignty.

But the people hadn't given God the honor He deserved, in word or deed or thought or emotion. In fact, they had robbed God by not making the tithe they

had been commanded to contribute. The tithes were prescribed in great detail in Deuteronomy 14:22-29: Each year they were to give a tenth of their crops to the Lord, and every three years they were to give it to the Levites, aliens, fathers, and widows. Disregarding the tithe wasn't the extent of their sin, but it was an outward expression of their inner hardness to God. Thus, the Lord allowed them to suffer to cause them to repent and turn back to Him. But often the hardest hearts bow up at the thought of submission and humility (see Amos 4:6-11).

Still, God told them that if they would bring the tenth into the storehouse, He would open the floodgates of heaven and **"pour out a blessing for you without measure."** Yet again, He would restore, He would forgive, and He would bless.

JAMES 2:10-11 / The disrespectful line of questions from God's people in Malachi reveal that they felt no remorse for their sins. And their lack of tithing showed a dishonor and lack of love to God and to others in their midst.

God does not grade on a sliding scale—either we are obedient or we're not. Either we follow the law or we don't. Our sins reveal the state of our heart, that God is not our Lord. If He were, we would obey. James spelled out this truth plainly: If you keep all of the law except one thing, you've not kept the law. In God's standards, we're not just trying to pass or get a C+; His two grades are 100 or F, as in "fail," and as it stands, every Israelite—and every human being—has failed. Each of us is a lawbreaker because none of us can obey God's law perfectly.

But God isn't a ruthless overlord. He had built in a system of offerings and sacrifices for when His people fell short of His standards. But that was part of the problem for the Jews: At the time Malachi wrote his words, they had fallen far short and didn't even care. They were guilty and it didn't bother them.

POINT 2

THE BOASTING OF THE WICKED REVEALS THEIR SHAMELESSNESS (MAL. 3:13-15).

NOTES

13 “Your words against me are harsh,” says the LORD. Yet you ask, “What have we spoken against you?” **14** You have said, “It is useless to serve God. What have we gained by keeping his requirements and walking mournfully before the LORD of Armies? **15** So now we consider the arrogant to be fortunate. Not only do those who commit wickedness prosper, they even test God and escape.”

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Malachi 3:13-15** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 13-14** commentary to highlight the following point (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

Harsh words against God, **accusations** and **complaints**, reveal our **lack** of faith and respect for the Lord.

DISCUSS: What are some examples of harsh words we might be guilty of speaking against the Lord? (“I don’t see anything good that will come from this”; “Why even try? We just keep getting kicked around by life”; “That’s it! I’m going to stop trying to help others and I’m just going to live for me”; “God doesn’t care, so why should I care?”; “God never listens to me”)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 15** commentary to emphasize the following idea (the **bold** words fill in blanks in the DDG):

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

TRANSITION: Sin, guilt, and shame had marked God’s people. Not only had they sinned in thought, word, and deed, but they had become hardened to God’s authority and mercy, just like at other times in their history. Cyclical sin is a tough centrifuge to escape from. However, this sinful pattern is never a hopeless trap. Though we often turn our backs on God, He never turns His back on us.

COMMENTARY

VERSES 13-14 / Through Malachi, God clearly identified the sins of His people: They had despised His name (1:6), defiled Him through improper sacrifices (1:8), turned away from His path (2:8), caused others to stumble (2:8), defiled marriage covenants (2:14), and spoken words of faithlessness (2:17). At the end of Malachi 2, God's people had accused God of turning justice upside down because they saw evil people prevailing in society even as they wallowed in their sin. We may say the same thing today; some people who flaunt their sin often seem to flourish.

David saw the same problem. He felt that God was far away when he saw the wicked boast and sin shamelessly (see Ps. 10:1-11). But this perception led the psalmist to pray—he asked God to rise up and take a stand against the wicked and on behalf of the oppressed (Ps. 10:12-13). Two seemingly contrasting attributes of God's nature led David to a crisis of faith: Though God “executes acts of righteousness and justice for all the oppressed” (Ps. 103:6), He is also “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love” (Ps. 103:8). But regardless of his confusion at what he saw, David trusted the Lord to make things right.

God loves His creation; He loves us. He loves the holy and the wayward, the seeker and the slacker. He has many times explained that He is slow to anger (Ex. 34:6; Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:17; Ps. 86:15; and more), and we love it when He is patient with us. But we are not so patient with others' sin. It is here that we have a choice: faithfully entrust ourselves to our good God or faithlessly accuse the Lord of being a good-for-nothing. The Jews were opting for the latter, so God declared, **“Your words against me are harsh.”** The words of the people—supposedly God's people—were bold and arrogant and shameless.

When confronted with God's indictment regarding their words, the people did not respond with humility or contrition, indi-

cating they didn't trust His judgment. Instead, they questioned, **“What have we spoken against you?”** It wasn't enough that God rendered His verdict, the people wanted evidence to judge for themselves. Their brash response revealed they had forgotten who God was, notably that He is all-knowing. The Lord knew exactly what they had said—they had declared it was useless to serve God, to obey His commands, and to mourn their sin.

VERSE 15 / Like David, the Jews saw what seemed to be a slight against the godly because the wicked were flourishing. But unlike the man after God's own heart (see 1 Sam. 13:14), the Jews did not take their concerns to the Lord. Instead, they allowed complaining to spread among God's people rather than seek God's face.

Complaining was a continual source of sin for the Israelites. They complained about not having water (Ex. 17:2), about hardship (Num. 11:1), and about God Himself (Num. 14:27). The complaining didn't diminish over time. The Pharisees and scribes complained about Jesus (Luke 5:30; 15:2). Complaining is a cancer and a poison that eats away at a body of believers. God doesn't demand that we pretend all is good and life is perfect. He understands we have troubles, but He tells us to take our concerns, our troubles, and our hardships to Him—not bypass Him to complain to our families, friends, or congregations.

Taking our concerns to God is a prayer, a plea, and a crying out; complaining about God is a sin. When we lose sight of who He is—almighty, holy, all-knowing, unchanging—and mistakenly think that God exists to serve our purposes, we've upturned reality. When we complain, we've forgotten that God's people are called first and foremost to glorify Him (Isa. 43:7; 1 Cor. 10:31). Faith is the expression that even when we can't see God's hand, we still trust His authority and love. But when we see the boasting of the sinful and think their path is best, we are following a lie.

POINT 3

THE FEAR OF THE LORD AMONG THE RIGHTEOUS PROMPTS HIS COMPASSION (MAL. 3:16-18).

NOTES

16 At that time those who feared the LORD spoke to one another. The LORD took notice and listened. So a book of remembrance was written before him for those who feared the LORD and had high regard for his name. **17** “They will be mine,” says the LORD of Armies, “my own possession on the day I am preparing. I will have compassion on them as a man has compassion on his son who serves him. **18** So you will again see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him.

READ: Ask a volunteer to read aloud **Malachi 3:16-18** from his or her Bible.

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSE 16** commentary to highlight the following point (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Even when God’s people seem faithless, there will always be a group who **fear** Him. God **sees** them and **remembers** them.

DISCUSS: What are some ways we should speak to one another as those who fear the Lord? (encouraging believers to fear and obey the Lord; confronting one another in love and rebuking sin; speaking with love in Christ; readily seeking forgiveness and offering forgiveness; reminding one another of the salvation we have through faith in Jesus Christ)

EXPLAIN: Use the **VERSES 17-18** commentary to emphasize the following idea (*the bold words fill in blanks in the DDG*):

Those who fear the Lord find **confidence** in His promises, experience His **compassion**, and **act** with righteousness.

DISCUSS: Pass out copies of **PACK ITEM 14: SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES**, and then ask: **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?** (wait for a group member to respond first; only share your response as a conclusion to the discussion)



BOOK OF REMEMBRANCE

God being infinite doesn't need a book to remember our deeds or our names. Whether literal or figurative, it is used as a word picture, similar to the "book of life" (Ps. 69:28; Dan. 12:1; Rev. 13:8; 20:15), to help us understand that God never forgets our good deeds or our bad deeds. One day we all will be held accountable for our actions (2 Cor. 5:10), and He knows those who are His and those who are not. The kings at the time had similar books to record deeds, names, and events (Esth. 6:1), so the Israelites would have understood this concept.

COMMENTARY

VERSE 16 / In the midst of God's conversation with His ungrateful, unashamed, disobedient people, we find comfort and insight: there were still **"those who feared the LORD."**

There always have been and always will be those who "fear," or revere, the Lord. The Hebrew word can mean actual fear (Deut. 20:8), but most often this idea refers to one who sees God in clarity and acts appropriately. Abraham feared God (Gen. 22:12), as did Obadiah (1 Kings 18:3), Job (Job 1:1), David (2 Sam. 6:9), and sometimes the Israelites (Ex. 14:31; 2 Kings 17:33; Hag. 1:12). Furthermore, we know Esther, Ezra, and Nehemiah feared the Lord. Sometimes these people were surrounded by others who loved and obeyed God, but sometimes they weren't. Maybe they felt like Elijah did, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God . . . I alone am left" (1 Kings 19:10). Sometimes we feel like we too are the only ones fearing the Lord.

But that's never the case. The Lord sees our faith and our faithfulness. He sees us strengthen the weak hands and steady the shaking knees (Isa. 35:3). God noticed and listened when those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and He does the same for us. We see from these verses that the names of those who fear the Lord are recorded. We're not sure if this **"book of remembrance"** is physical or symbolic, but we know it points to God choosing to remember forever those who fear His name.

The God-fearers did something else, according to verse 16: they **"had high regard for his name."** This beautiful Hebrew word can mean to weave, to fabricate, to compute, calculate, plan, or count. When we think on God's name like this, we meditate on His identity, His works, and His intricacies. God sees us clearly, and we see Him clearly when we choose to look closely.

VERSES 17-18 / One of God's most gracious blessings that He pours out on us is hope: confidence in tomorrow's promises. And as

if knowing that the names of those who fear the Lord are recorded in a book of remembrance weren't enough, there are the hopeful promises found in Malachi 3:17-18:

"They will be mine . . . my own possession on the day I am preparing." God's plan was not finished yet. Though Malachi was wrapping up his words and God was preparing to issue radio silence for four hundred years, He was already preparing for the future day when all those who fear Him will be His army. Even the unfaithfulness of His people would lead to the fulfillment of His glorious plan.

"I will have compassion on them." God's compassion reaches out and grabs us even in our stubbornness. It was the Lord's compassion that made the angels save Lot and his family from certain death (Gen. 19:15); with compassion, He fulfilled His covenant of grace (2 Kings 13:23), and because of His compassion, He forgives our sinful rebellion (Ps. 51:1).

"You will again see the difference between the righteous and the wicked." In the Old Testament, "righteous" and "wicked" appear together many times. The actions of each person reveal whether the heart is righteous or wicked. In the New Testament, Jesus speaks of the Son of Man, seated on His throne, separating the sheep and the goats, the righteous and the wicked, respectively (Matt. 25:31-33). The righteous are revealed by faithful obedience; the wicked by their lack of obedience.

Malachi delivered these words to all the people, both the righteous and the wicked. Those who had lived in disobedience would have sneered and asked disrespectful questions; those who had lived righteously would have cherished each word. The words of God are life-giving and refreshing to us today too. God sees our faithfulness. We belong to Him and He has wonderful compassion on us even in the midst of a wicked world. Don't give up. Your perseverance is noted in His book of remembrance.

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.

NOTES

HEAD:

When we feel shame, sometimes it is the Spirit working in us to reveal the depths of our depravity because of sin. What a gracious outpouring of God's mercy to draw us back to Himself through the shame we feel over sin. We need not seek to overcome that shame when led by the Holy Spirit; instead, we need to seek God's face for forgiveness and restoration. Through salvation in Jesus, we are free from the lasting shame that comes from sin. He allows us to find mercy and grace for our confessed and repented sin. Find joy and peace with God in turning from sin and throwing off its shame.

How do you normally handle shame? Through what you've learned today, what should you do?

HEART:

God's people must consider that sin—and the guilt and shame that accompany it—begins in our thoughts. We must daily spend time learning and understanding God's nature, His commands, His actions, and His heart. As we grasp mentally who He is and how He desires for us to live, we agree that He is Lord and we choose to accept His precepts. Sin worms its way into our lives through our thoughts: "It's not that big of a deal"; "God wants you to be happy"; "You don't really need to do that." But we choose to believe God and know Him in spirit and truth.

What struggles to agree with God's authority and commands in your life will you confess to Him today?

HANDS:

As we share the truth of the gospel with others, we help them to walk in freedom because Jesus gives them the power to overcome their sinful ways and habits. Because of that, we reach out to unsaved friends and family members with the hope of salvation rather than trying to fix their sinful ways. Only Jesus gives them the power over sin; we can't do that. But through sharing our own stories of struggle and triumph over sin, we can point them to the power of Christ. He is the only source of forgiveness and restoration.

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?

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."²

—Jen Oshman

POINT 2: THE BOASTING OF THE WICKED REVEALS THEIR SHAMELESSNESS (MAL. 3:13-15).

+ COMMENTARY

“The Jews here mistake utterly the nature of God’s service, converting it into a mercenary bargain; they attended to outward observances, not from love to God, but in the hope of being well paid for it in outward prosperity; when this was withheld, they charged God with being unjust, forgetting alike that God requires very different motives from theirs to accompany outward observances, and that God rewards even the true worshipper not so much in this life as in the life to come.”³

POINT 3: THE FEAR OF THE LORD AMONG THE RIGHTEOUS PROMPTS HIS COMPASSION (MAL. 3:16-18).

+ COMMENTARY

“As a king who owns everything in his kingdom would choose and treasure certain things above all else (1 Chr 29:3; Eccl 2:8), so God chose Israel out of all the peoples of the earth (Deut 7:6; 14:2). Psalm 135:4 is similar to the wording of Mal 3:17—“For the Lord has chosen Jacob to be his own, Israel to be his treasured possession.” But the Exodus passage made clear from the start that this privileged position carried conditions of obedience and holiness. As the apostle Paul explained, “Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel” (Rom 9:6). So on this eschatological day it will be true Israel, the righteous remnant, who will be the Lord’s own treasured possession.”⁴

References

1. Richard Baxter, in *The Practical Works of the Rev. Richard Baxter*, by William Orme, vol. 23 (London: James Duncan, 1830), 306.
2. Jen Oshman, *Enough About Me* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 57-58.
3. A. R. Fausset, *A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical, on the Old and New Testaments: Jeremiah-Malachi*, vol. IV (London; Glasgow: William Collins, Sons, & Company, Limited, n.d.), 723.
4. Richard A. Taylor and E. Ray Clendenen, *Haggai, Malachi*, vol. 21A, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2004), 446.

SCOPE AND SEQUENCE

VOL 1: FROM CREATION TO CHAOS

(Genesis) Fall 2021

- Unit 1:** The Heavens Declare the Glory of God
- Unit 2:** Let Us Make a Name for Ourselves
- Unit 3:** I Will Make Your Name Great

VOL 2: FROM CAPTIVITY TO THE WILDERNESS

(Exodus–Deuteronomy) Winter 2021-22

- Unit 4:** Out of Egypt I Called My Son
- Unit 5:** To Dwell in the House of the Lord
- Unit 6:** Be Holy, Because I Am Holy

VOL 3: FROM CONQUEST TO A KINGDOM

(Joshua–1 Samuel) Spring 2022

- Unit 7:** Lord, Teach Me Your Statutes
- Unit 8:** Fear the Lord and Worship Him
- Unit 9:** There Is No Fear of God Before Their Eyes

VOL 4: FROM UNITY TO DIVISION

(1 Samuel–1 Kings) Summer 2022

- Unit 10:** Because of Your Hardened Heart
- Unit 11:** Create a Clean Heart for Me
- Unit 12:** If You Walk Before Me with a Heart of Integrity

VOL 5: FROM REBELLION TO EXILE

(1 Kings–The Prophets) Fall 2022

- Unit 13:** Your Passions Wage War Within You
- Unit 14:** Seek the Lord, All You Humble of the Earth
- Unit 15:** He Has Made Every Nationality

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
- Unit 17:** Take Refuge in the Lord
- Unit 18:** For Look, the Day Is Coming

VOL 7: FROM HEAVEN TO EARTH

(The Gospels) Spring 2023

- Unit 19:** Here Is the Lamb of God
- Unit 20:** God’s Love Was Revealed Among Us in This Way
- Unit 21:** Without Faith It Is Impossible to Please God

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
- Unit 23:** The Kingdom of God Is in Your Midst
- Unit 24:** God’s Glory in the Face of Jesus Christ

VOL 9: FROM DEATH TO RESURRECTION

(The Gospels) Fall 2023

- Unit 25:** Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Who Kills the Prophets
- Unit 26:** The Hour Has Come
- Unit 27:** The King of the Jews

VOL 10: FROM MANY PEOPLE TO ONE PEOPLE

(The Gospels, Acts) Winter 2023-24

- Unit 28:** I Am with You Always
- Unit 29:** You Will Be My Witnesses
- Unit 30:** Every Day the Lord Added to Their Number

VOL 11: FROM ONE NATION TO ALL NATIONS

(Acts and Epistles) Spring 2024

- Unit 31:** Every Knee Will Bow
- Unit 32:** The Power and the Wisdom of God
- Unit 33:** A Prisoner of Christ Jesus

VOL 12: FROM THIS WORLD TO THE WORLD TO COME

(Acts, Epistles, Revelation) Summer 2024

- Unit 34:** Ambassadors for Christ
- Unit 35:** That I May Gain Christ
- Unit 36:** A New Heaven and a New Earth



A better way to order (and teach) The Gospel Project

Enrich your group meetings and simplify your life with the Adults Group Box. It has everything you need to deliver a great group experience. Plus, you save money, and you save time by only having to order and distribute one item per leader (instead of 12). The Box even includes a Quick Start Guide that explains how all the items work together:

- 10 Daily Discipleship Guides
- 1 Leader Guide (CSB)
- 1 Leader Pack (which includes a variety of visual aids for better learning)
- 1 Quick Start Guide
- All for \$72.99 (14% savings)

Order one Box for each group. (If a group has more than 10 people, simply add extra Daily Discipleship Guides to the order.)

Price and availability subject to change without notice.

gospelproject.com/adults

Lifeway

FROM CAPTIVITY TO RESTORATION

The consequences of sin against a holy God wreak havoc upon people. The nation of Judah experienced decades in captivity. But even in the land of their exile, God worked to provide for and restore His people both physically and spiritually. As the Old Testament narrative draws to a close, groups will see the gracious faithfulness of God on display and hear His promise of hope that draws our attention to Jesus, our Savior from all sin, shame, and guilt.

WE'RE HERE TO HELP!

WEEKLY HELPS:

gospelproject.com/resources

WEEKLY PODCAST:

Look for [The Gospel Project for Adults](#) and [The Hero of the Story](#) on your favorite podcast app.

Lifeway adults

gospelproject.com

RELIGION/Biblical Studies/Bible Study Guides

