



the **GOSPEL**PROJECT
FOR STUDENTS

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THE GOSPEL PROJECT FOR STUDENTS
LEADER GUIDE

VOLUME 6

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

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UNIT 16 GOD IN THE EXILE

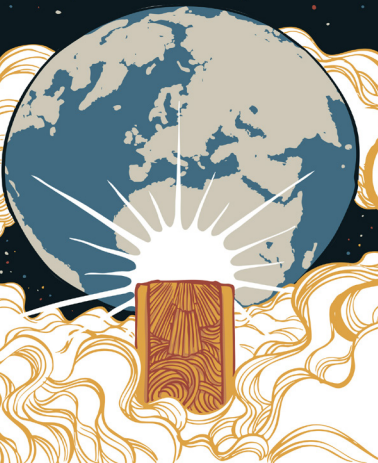
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PREPARATION

- Access the leader training for each session at gospelproject.com/leader-training.
- Read through the main passage and surrounding chapters of Scripture listed on the opening page of each session.
- Study the **Before You Teach** section, focusing on which aspects of the study you will cover during group time.
- Check each session for a pack item list or description.

BEFORE YOU TEACH

These pages are designed to help leaders prepare for each session, providing content that digs deeper into the focal passages and main point emphasized throughout the session.

- **Biblical Commentary:** This content is compiled to help leaders understand how the passage connects to today's culture.
- **Theology Connection:** Each session contains a biblical doctrine that directly relates to the Bible study material.



CONTEXT

We believe Scripture should be studied within the context in which it was written. This section breaks down where the passage fits in the grand narrative of God's Word. At the beginning of each book, we highlight the author, time period, original audience, and purpose. This section also features important historical facts to help leaders and students understand the message.

INTRO OPTIONS

- **Kickstarter:** This is the shortest option for groups which may not have time for longer activities. They rotate between "Did You Know?" facts, short polls, and Heart Checks, which refer to the previous lesson as a form of accountability.
- **Activity:** This activity is mostly discussion-based. It's designed to take up minimal time with few or no supplies.
- **Cultural Connection:** This feature helps connect the week's content to the students' culture. It will hit on real-life questions and difficult topics. It's designed to encourage deep discussion between students and leaders.



DISCUSSION SECTION

The **Discussion** section is designed to show how God's story connects with our own stories today. Here we will see how the biblical storyline for each session challenges the way we think, feel, and live each day. While this certainly happens on an individual level, we do want to stress to students that all Christians share this calling and mission to live differently. Leaders will also find suggested answers in bold as a guide for more reluctant groups.



This icon indicates questions that look at how the content connects with Christ, emphasizing to students how all of Scripture points to Him.



This icon indicates questions that directly relate to the doctrine for the week. We want to encourage discussion about these doctrines to expand students' biblical worldview.



The **Head/Heart/Hands** questions are designed to show how God's story connects with our own. We'll see how Scripture challenges the ways we think, feel, and live. While this certainly happens on an individual level, we do want to stress to students that this calling and mission to live differently is something all Christians share and pursue.



LEADER PACK

The **Leader Pack** provides additional ways to make the session interactive with One Sheets, PowerPoint templates, posters, and other additional resources to support both leader preparation and group time.



STUDENT DEVOTIONS

Students remember thirty percent of what they hear and seventy percent of what they say and write. To get students more involved in the biblical storyline of Scripture and in their personal discipleship, we have included five days of devotions following each session in the **Daily Discipleship Guide**. As a leader, emphasize weekly how important it is for students to read these devotions and develop the spiritual discipline of being in the Word of God. These devotions will provide simple techniques for studying the Bible as illustrated by the **Seven Arrows**. The pages are perforated so that students can tear them out and take them home.

SEVEN ARROWS



What does this passage say?



What did this passage mean to its original audience?



What does this passage tell us about God?



What does this passage tell us about man?



What does this passage demand of me?



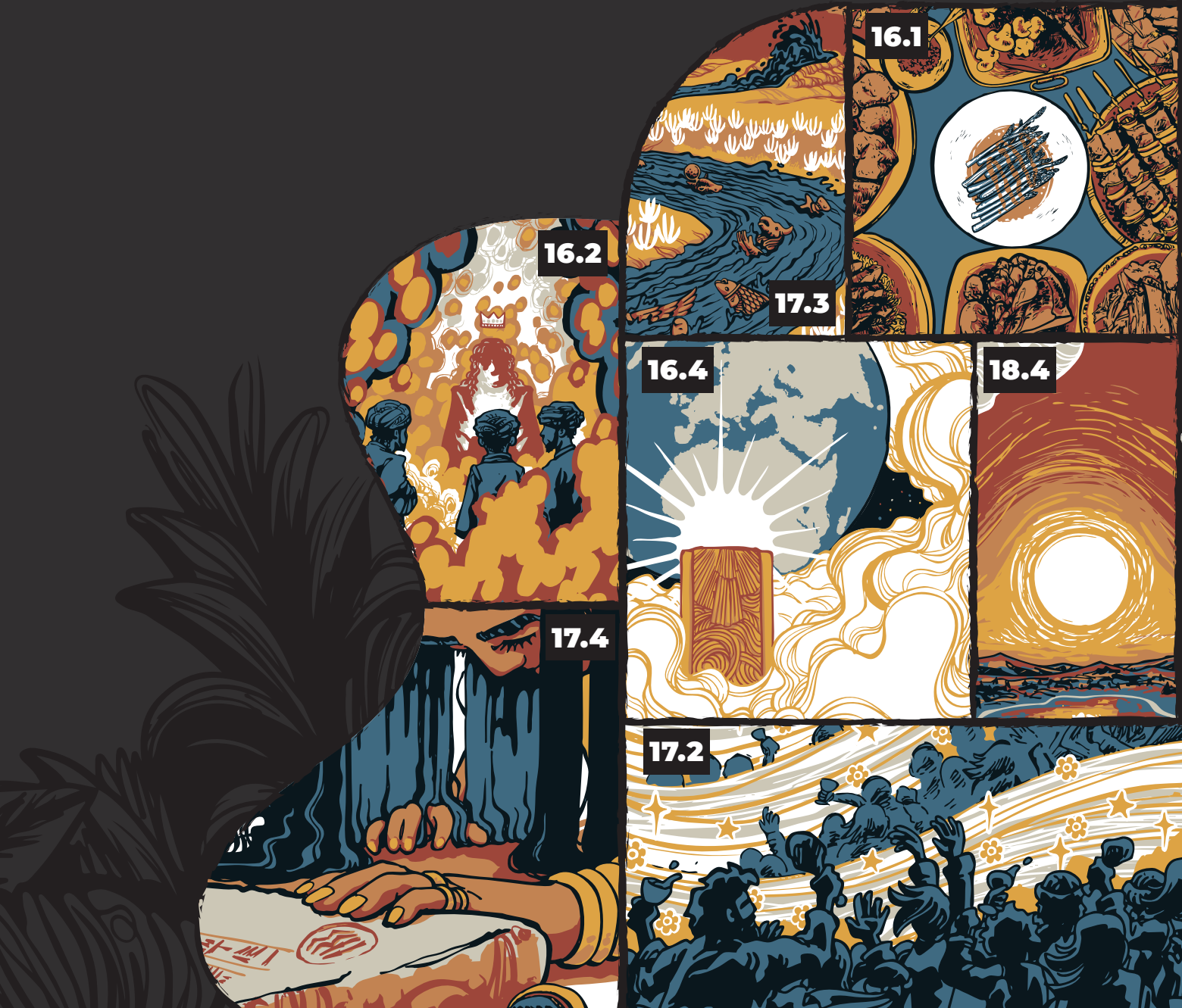
How does this passage change the way I relate to people?



How does this passage prompt me to pray?

VOLUME 6 | ESV

PROPHETS AND PROVISION



16.1 THE KING'S FOOD

16.2 OUT OF THE FIRE

16.3 INTO THE LIONS' DEN

16.4 AN EVERLASTING DOMINION

17.1 GATHERED AS ONE

17.2 REBUILDING THE TEMPLE

17.3 YOUR KING IS COMING

17.4 IF IT PLEASES THE KING

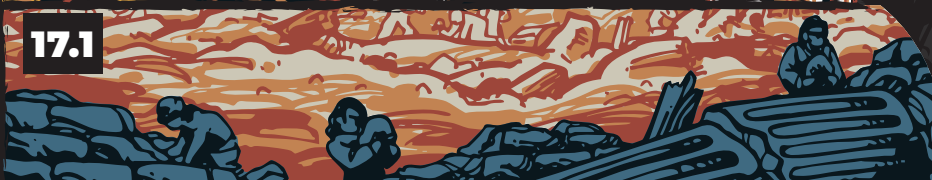
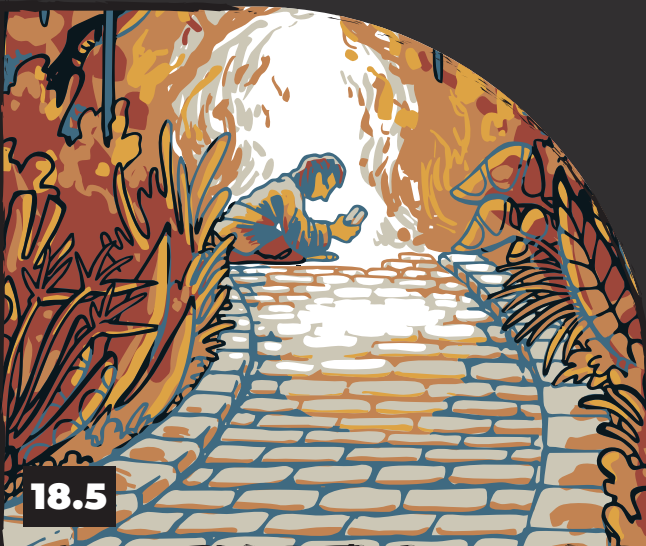
18.1 FROM THE MOUNDS OF RUBBLE

18.2 ALL WHO COULD LISTEN

18.3 SACKCLOTH AND DUST

18.4 THE DAY IS COMING

18.5 THE TRUE LIGHT






AUTHOR & CONTENT EDITOR

ALECIA BRYANT

Welcome to Volume 6! And welcome to exile—an exile that began well before Babylon, when Adam and Eve were banished from Eden. An exile we endure today, as we wait for home. In this volume, we'll embark on the last leg of Old Testament history. We've watched God's people break covenant with the Lord to wander after false gods and worldly comforts—a wandering very much like our own. God's people were sent into Babylonian exile, a consequence of their refusal to return to Him. But even in exile, the Lord was sovereign, working through pagan rulers and kingdoms to establish His kingdom. See, even in Babylon, God preserved a bold and faithful remnant, who refused to succumb to Babylonian beliefs—even when they faced a fiery furnace, the mouths of lions, or a king's fury. How did they remain steady? They longed for God's kingdom; they were His, even in Babylon. And we are His, even here, as exiles whose citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20).

God kept His promise and brought His people home after seventy years. The Lord helped them rebuild, stone by stone; more importantly, He restored them, heart by heart—for God was about to do something new. Soon, the Father would shake heaven and earth to send His Son, the One who would redeem humanity and lead us home. If we learn nothing else from Israel's fall and exile, let us learn this: God is sovereign. He worked through all of human history—even the messy, evil, brutal parts—to accomplish His plan of salvation. What a faithful God! Like Israel, we fall to sin and wander after idols. May we respond to God's voice calling us to return; He is faithful to rebuild us and restore us. And may we live as exiles here—holy, devoted, always reaching toward our eternal home.

Alecia Bryant



**AND
TO HIM WAS
GIVEN DOMINION AND
GLORY AND A KINGDOM,
THAT ALL PEOPLES, NATIONS,
AND LANGUAGES SHOULD
SERVE HIM; HIS DOMINION IS AN
EVERLASTING DOMINION, WHICH
SHALL NOT PASS AWAY, AND HIS
KINGDOM ONE THAT SHALL NOT
BE DESTROYED.**

DANIEL 7:14

THE KING'S FOOD

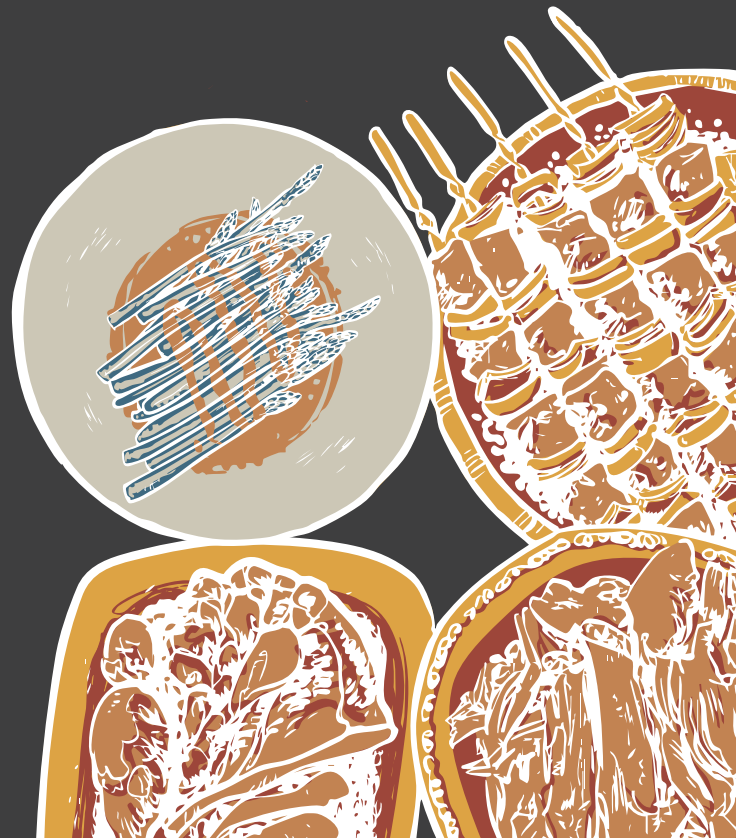
MAIN POINT.

Even when culture tries to label us, God defines our identity.



CHRIST CONNECTION

Christ promised to send a Helper when He returned to His throne in heaven (John 14:16-17). He sent the Holy Spirit to dwell within all believers, giving us guidance and wisdom so that we can live in a way that pleases the Lord.



THRIVING IN BABYLON

This week, we're covering the passages and main points below. But we encourage you to read all of the content on the timeline as you prepare to teach.

Daniel 1-2

WE MUST HOLD TIGHTLY TO OUR CONVICTIONS

DANIEL 1:1-14

1 In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. 2 And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god. 3 Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, 4 youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. 5 The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank. They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king. 6 Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah. 7 And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego. 8 But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself. 9 And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs, 10 and the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, "I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and your drink; for why should he see that you were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age? So you would endanger my head with the king." 11 Then Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, 12 "Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. 13 Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king's food be observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see." 14 So he listened to them in this matter, and tested them for ten days.

GOD REWARDS FAITHFULNESS

DANIEL 1:15-21

15 At the end of ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king's food. 16 So the steward took away their food and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables. 17 As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. 18 At the end of the time, when the king had commanded that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. 19 And the king spoke with them, and among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Therefore they stood before the king. 20 And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom. 21 And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus.

BEFORE YOU TEACH

MAIN POINT.

Even when culture tries to label us, God defines our identity.

Leaders: May we believe God is faithful no matter what we experience here as exiles (1 Pet. 2:11).

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

WE MUST HOLD TIGHTLY TO OUR CONVICTIONS

DANIEL 1:1-2

“‘Delivered’ [handed] is literally the Hebrew word *nātan*, ‘gave.’ It was not Nebuchadnezzar’s military might or brilliance that brought about the downfall of Jerusalem, but it was the sovereign will of God. . . . For hundreds of years the Lord had warned his wayward people to repent or face judgment, but they had not listened to his servants the prophets (9:6). Moses had even predicted Israel’s captivity as a consequence of forsaking the Lord (Deut. 28:36-37,49-68). God had been patient, but Israel’s sin had now reached its limits, and judgment fell.”¹

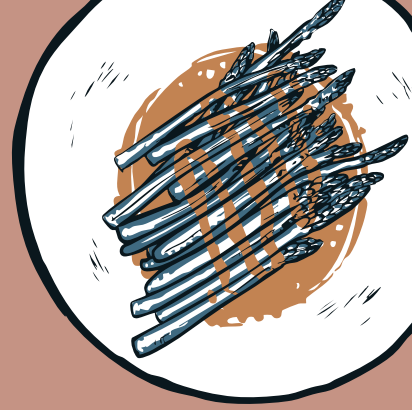
DANIEL 1:7

“The name Daniel translates ‘Elohim is my judge’; Hananiah, ‘Yahweh is gracious’; Mishael, ‘Who is like Elohim?’; and Azariah, ‘Yahweh helps.’ Changing names today is not a big deal. In the ancient world, however, it was huge. It went to the identity and core of who a person was. . . . The exact meanings of these new Babylonian names is not certain, though ‘certainly they were intended to honor Babylonian gods in similar ways’ to their Hebrew names. And they were intended to confuse these young men and reorient them away from Yahweh and toward the pagan gods of their new home.”²

GOD REWARDS FAITHFULNESS

DANIEL 1:8

“Many of the foods eaten at the Babylonian court (pork and horseflesh) would have been unclean according to the law of Moses (Lev. 11 and Deut. 14), either inherently or because they were not prepared properly; for example, the blood might not have been drained from the meat (Lev. 17:13-14). To eat such foods would have been a sin for an Israelite and would have rendered the individual ceremonially unclean before God. . . . The meat and wine would have been undesirable because a portion of it was (at least on occasions if not always) first offered sacrificially to the Babylonian gods before being sent to the king and was therefore associated with idolatrous worship. Although wine was not forbidden by the Jewish law, Daniel’s aversion to drinking it probably is to be explained by its use as a libation in these pagan rituals. Wood points out that partaking of this food would have been an indirect act of worshiping the Babylonian deities.”³



CONTEXT

Background: Daniel is one of the most intriguing books in the Old Testament, yet many contemporary readers avoid it. Daniel is a historical and prophetic book with apocalyptic features. Daniel, the author, was taken captive to Babylon in 605 BC, likely as a teenager. He never returned home and lived the remainder of his days in exile—ripped from his family to serve the king. The first half of Daniel (chaps. 1–6) recounts his firsthand experiences in Babylon. The second half (chaps. 7–12) contains prophecies concerning worldly kingdoms and God’s everlasting kingdom. The book’s message to other Jews scattered in exile was this: Our God is God, and He will redeem us. That redemption may not have looked like what the people hoped for and may not have come when they wanted it to, but God was sovereign over Israel’s captivity. In fact, the Lord ordained it as punishment for the nation’s continued idolatry (Jer. 25:8-14). The book, and the entire exile, raises many questions for modern believers: Why would God let His faithful people suffer? Why would God allow a pagan nation to subdue His people? Is God in control? Does He see? Daniel’s resounding answers to these questions weave like threads throughout the narrative and still echo today: Faithfulness to God isn’t dependent on rescue; it is rooted in who God is—faithful, capable, sovereign.

THEOLOGY CONNECTION



Justification and Works

Justification is not the result of human effort or good works but comes 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 (James 2:17). While good works do not establish justification, they do verify a genuine faith and make our justification evident to others.

LEADERS' PRAYER

GOD, HELP US TO CONVEY DIFFICULT TRUTHS TO OUR STUDENTS. WE KNOW YOU ARE FAITHFUL AND SOVEREIGN, EVEN WHEN OUR CIRCUMSTANCES SAY OTHERWISE. YOU REDEEMED US THROUGH YOUR SON, AND WE HAVE EVERY REASON TO STAND ON THE TRUTH OF YOUR WORD.



KICK STARTER

DID YOU KNOW?

Dreams are a strange phenomenon. Your brain makes it impossible for you to move while dreaming; when the brain doesn't do this, you may experience sleepwalking. Stress can impact whether your dreams are positive or negative, but you may not remember your dreams because the brain operates at a lower cognitive level during sleep.⁴

These optional activities are designed to help your students interact. You'll find a Discussion Activity and a Cultural Connection, which touches on a relevant topic in today's teen culture. Each group is different, so adapt these activities to fit your group's needs. The goal is for students to connect more to the lesson as they connect to the topic and to one another.

1

GIVING IN

SUPPLIES LIST: NONE

Ask the following questions, allowing time for students to share responses:

- **WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE GULLIBLE? ARE YOU GULLIBLE OR NOT?**
- **HOW EASILY DO YOU GIVE IN WHEN PEOPLE TRY TO TALK YOU INTO SOMETHING?**
- **WHEN HAVE YOU BEEN PERSUADED TO DO SOMETHING YOU DIDN'T PLAN TO DO?**

Some of us might admit that we're gullible; we are easily persuaded. Maybe we're easily swayed because we're naive or too trusting of others. Sometimes, this quality leads us to give in to something we don't want to do or something we know is wrong. When someone's argument is convincing enough, we buy into it. When it comes to our faith, we must hold to what is true even when logic and reason point to acting against it.

2

CULTURAL CONNECTION

Many of us might say we want to make an impact on the world. We want our lives to matter—to make a difference. Jesus charged us to live in such a way that our presence changes the environment around us. He expressed the concept like this: Live like lights in a dark world; be like salt, preserving life around you (Matt. 5:13-16). But in reality, many of us aren't making a difference. Why? We can't make a difference in our culture because we're not willing to be different from our culture. We are wrapped up in what's popular or acceptable, and instead of shining like lights and taking a stand, we blend in with the world. We're afraid of being different. We're afraid of speaking out. Our fears of being gossiped about, being laughed at, and losing friends are often enough to make us sit down and remain silent about our faith—enough to make us compromise our convictions, how we know God calls us to live. At the end of our lives, we won't regret living like light and salt, but we will regret the moments we wasted conforming to this world.

DISCUSSION

MAIN POINT.

Even when culture tries to label us, God defines our identity.

WE MUST HOLD TIGHTLY TO OUR CONVICTIONS

READ DANIEL 1:1-14

WHY WOULD DANIEL AND HIS FRIENDS REJECT THE KING'S FOOD?

Leaders: Share commentary about unclean foods. Many of us might ask, "What's the big deal? What if this was God's way of taking care of them?" But God had clearly forbidden His people from eating certain foods. Acting against that command was sin, even if culture justified it. Our minds should recall the enemy's common strategy: "Did God actually say . . ." (Gen. 3:1). Also, the king's food often was offered in sacrifice to Babylonian gods first; eating it equaled idolatry. **What we can take from this is that God will never lead us to act against what He has spoken in His Word because God cannot contradict Himself.**



WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO DETERMINE TO REMAIN FAITHFUL BEFORE THE TEMPTATION OR TRIAL?

What did people think of Daniel's decision to reject the king's food? Probably that he lost his mind and foolishly wasted a great opportunity. He likely faced pressure to do what many people would've done in his situation—eat the food to remain strong and ask for forgiveness later. **Here's the deal: Babylon—the world—will always ask us to compromise. Always.** And if we wait until the moment of temptation—the moment we're hungry—to decide where we stand, we'll buckle under the pressure; we'll choose the king's food. **We must determine to know and live God's way before we're ever tempted to live another way.**

WHY IS THE MEN RECEIVING BABYLONIAN NAMES SIGNIFICANT? HOW DOES CULTURE TRY TO RENAME US OR PUSH US TO CONFORM?

Imagine what Daniel and his friends had endured. The Babylonians invaded their home, murdered fellow Jews, burned their city to ash, took beloved and valuable articles from God's temple, and carried most of the nation into exile and slavery. Then, the men were stripped of their Hebrew names, which paid respect to Yahweh, and given Babylonian names—names which uplifted Babylonian gods. They were indoctrinated with Babylonian culture, history, and religion. Why? The king made a grand scale attempt to erase Israel's identity. In short, the goal was for Daniel and his friends to assimilate, to become Babylonian and leave their Hebrew roots behind in the rubble. We encounter similar pressure from the culture surrounding us. Our identity as believers is challenged constantly by worldly values. **Culture pushes us to conform and embrace what it loves, to accept what it accepts, to tolerate what it celebrates. But as God's children, our identity can't be taken away from us unless we allow it—unless we choose to embrace "Babylon" instead of living as exiles and citizens of a better kingdom (Phil. 3:20; Heb. 11:10).**

GOD REWARDS FAITHFULNESS

READ DANIEL 1:15-21



HOW WERE DANIEL AND HIS FRIENDS THRIVING? WHAT DOES THIS SHOW YOU ABOUT HOW TO THRIVE HERE?

Even though they were deprived, the men thrived physically! How? God honored their obedience. He blessed them for holding faithfully to their convictions. Now, this passage isn't a magical formula for us. **At times, our obedience will be costly** (like it would be later for Daniel and the men). Obedience doesn't always ensure a favorable outcome, at least in a worldly sense. We might pay greatly for our obedience to God: We may lose worldly success or popularity; we may walk away from great opportunities; we may lose friends; we may not have support. But even then, we can still thrive. How? **We thrive spiritually when we remain faithfully connected to the Vine (John 15:5). Our thriving here may not look like the world's idea of thriving. We can lose all worldly comfort and still thrive because God sustains us, comforts us, and offers us peace. Thriving isn't tied to external circumstances but to our inner relationship with the Lord.**



DOES GOD REALLY EXPECT US TO BE FAITHFUL IN "BABYLON"—IN CULTURE OR TOUGH SITUATIONS? WHY?

Saying we have faith is one thing, but we're called to live it—in tough circumstances, under pressure, under temptation. If we live out our faith, then we can expect friction between our convictions and culture—our "Babylon." We'll have to choose: conviction or compromise. **Like Daniel, we can't excuse disobedience simply because Babylon is a tough place to live faithfully for Jesus. We have the amazing opportunity to live like citizens of heaven here in Babylon—here in our families, in our schools, in our friend groups, in our activities, in loss and death. In Babylon, our faith proves authentic.**



WHAT CAN WE DO WHEN WE WANT TO COMPROMISE AND ACCEPT THE "KING'S FOOD"?

Refusing the "king's food" is difficult because it appeals to us—to our God-given desires, our needs, and our flesh. But worldly "food" can't satisfy us. Giving in only leaves us starved. Jesus promised to send a Helper—the Holy Spirit—to dwell within us and to guide us. **Every step of obedience we take strengthens us for the next step of obedience.** Jesus relied on the Father to sustain Him even as He went to the cross. We can imitate Jesus as we take up our cross and follow Him here in Babylon because we aren't alone (Matt. 16:24).

WRAP-UP



IN WHAT AREA OF YOUR LIFE WOULD IT BE EASIER TO COMPROMISE—TO HAVE THE "KING'S FOOD"? WHERE DO YOU STRUGGLE TO BE FAITHFUL?

Daniel was forced to live in Babylon, but he determined not to let Babylon into his heart and mind. He resolved to maintain his identity and to follow God's law. Daniel's determination didn't happen overnight but was cultivated over years. When it came time to stand, Daniel did so because God's law had taken root in his heart. Maybe you struggle with compromising your language; maybe you compromise in the way you dress, in your friendships, or in your dating relationships. Maybe you struggle to honor God when it comes to your phone—to social media or inappropriate content. Do you know what God's Word says about these things? Has truth taken root deep inside of you? **Sure, giving in might feel easier, but God sent His Son so that you could experience freedom from all this and more. Staying faithful is possible; you don't have to compromise.** God has given you all you need to walk in godliness—even in Babylon (2 Pet. 1:3). Get into His Word. Let it take root. When it comes time to stand, lean into what is true.

OUT OF THE FIKE

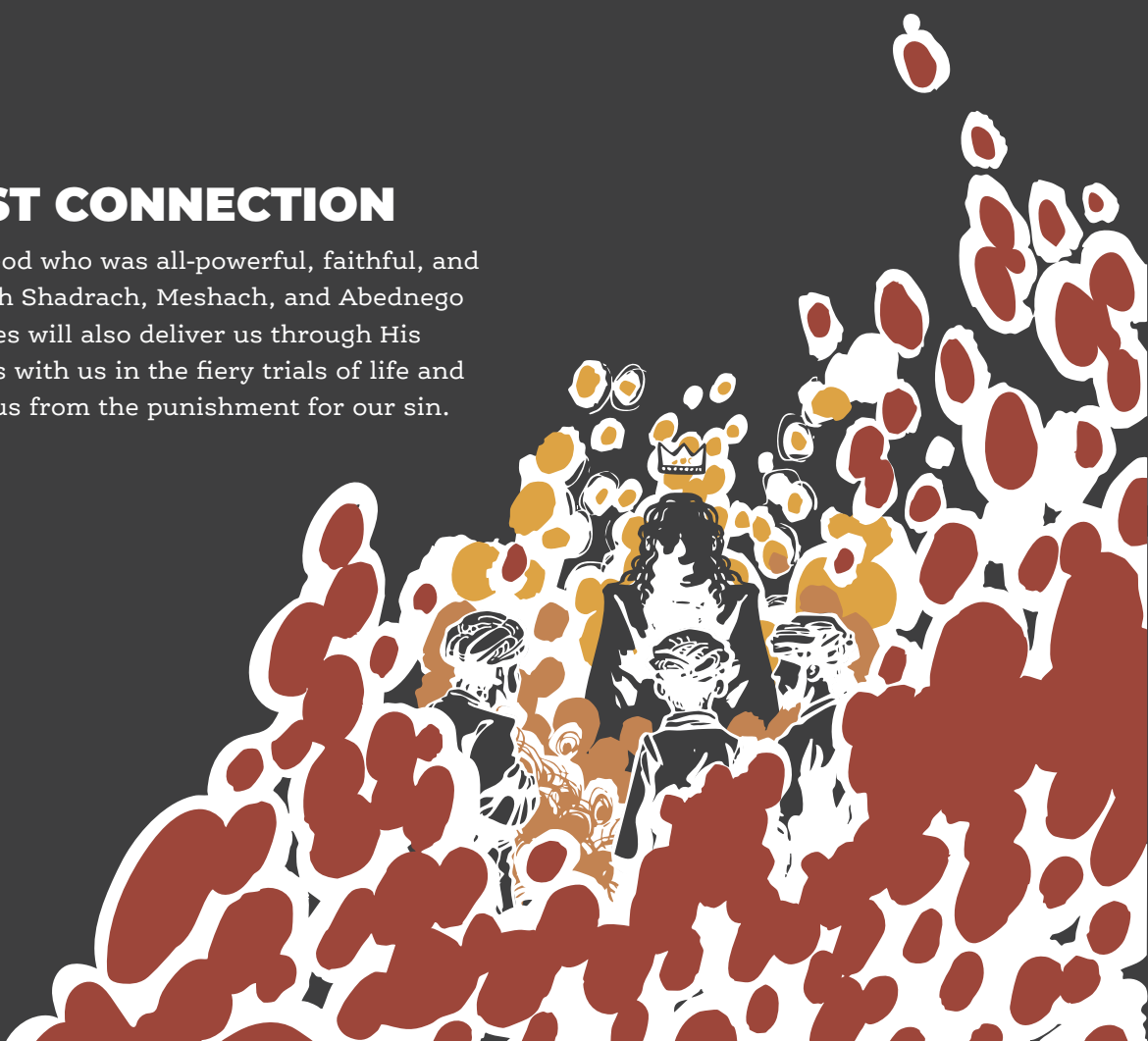
MAIN POINT.

Even when our faithfulness is risky, God is able to deliver us.



CHRIST CONNECTION

The same God who was all-powerful, faithful, and present with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the flames will also deliver us through His Son—who is with us in the fiery trials of life and who saves us from the punishment for our sin.





This week, we're covering the passages and main points below. But we encourage you to read all of the content on the timeline as you prepare to teach.

Daniel 3–4

FAITHFULNESS WILL COST US

DANIEL 3:4-6,14-18

4 And the herald proclaimed aloud, “You are commanded, O peoples, nations, and languages, 5 that when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. 6 And whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace.” . . . 14 Nebuchadnezzar answered and said to them, “Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? 15 Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?” 16 Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. 17 If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. 18 But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”

FAITHFULNESS POINTS PEOPLE TO JESUS

DANIEL 3:24-29

24 Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He declared to his counselors, “Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?” They answered and said to the king, “True, O king.” 25 He answered and said, “But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods.” 26 Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the burning fiery furnace; he declared, “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out, and come here!” Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire. 27 And the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the king’s counselors gathered together and saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men. The hair of their heads was not singed, their cloaks were not harmed, and no smell of fire had come upon them. 28 Nebuchadnezzar answered and said, “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king’s command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God. 29 Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way.”

BEFORE YOU TEACH

MAIN POINT.

Even when our faithfulness is risky, God is able to deliver us.

Leaders: Jesus is with you in every fire. He will sustain you, even if living by faith costs everything.

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

FAITHFULNESS WILL COST US

DANIEL 3:16-18

“Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego tell Nebuchadnezzar the king, ‘We don’t need to give you an answer to this question’ (3:16). For them the facts are clear: they did not bow down and worship. Furthermore, their hearts and minds on this issue were made up a long time ago. And finally, they will not adopt some spineless compromise that says something like this: ‘Well, we will bow on the outside, but we are really standing in the inside.’ That is not an option for them!”⁵

FAITHFULNESS POINTS PEOPLE TO JESUS

DANIEL 3:25

“We know that the preincarnate Christ did appear to individuals in the Old Testament. Most likely the fourth man in the fire was the angel of the Lord, God himself in the person of his Son Jesus Christ, a view held by many expositors. It is certainly true that when believers go through fiery trials Christ is with them. The three Hebrews experienced literally the promise, ‘When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze’ (Isa. 43:2).”⁶

DANIEL 3:26-27

“The common excuses for moral and spiritual compromise, especially the blaming of contemporary influences, are contradicted by the faithfulness of these men. In spite of separation from parents and of the corrupting influences of Babylonian religion, political pressure, and immorality, they did not waver in their hour of testing. . . . Daniel intended this chapter to remind Israel of the evils of idolatry and the necessity of obeying God rather than men. But the main thrust of the passage is not an invented moral story which actually never happened, as critics infer, but rather a display of a God who is faithful to his people even in captivity and is ever ready to deliver those who put their trust in him.”⁷

DANIEL 3:28-29

“Babylon had defeated Judah in battle, and pagans commonly held that victory over another nation was proof that their god was greater than the deity of the conquered foe. Yahweh wanted to dispel any such notion. Through this miracle and others recorded in the book, Yahweh made it clear to Nebuchadnezzar (who blatantly challenged Yahweh’s power by his actions in this incident) and to all the world that Judah’s defeat was not because their God did not exist or was anemic.”⁸

CONTEXT

Ancient eastern kings who defeated other nations often believed their god/gods were stronger than the defeated nation's god/gods. Nebuchadnezzar's taking of valuables from the Jewish temple declared victory over Judah's God and His people. Kings then often assimilated the fallen nation's god into their own collection of gods and placed the valuables in their shrines and temples. Nebuchadnezzar was no different. Even after hearing Daniel's interpretation of a dream warning him that his kingdom would one day fall, Nebuchadnezzar still chose pride. Though he acknowledged Daniel's God was "God of gods, Lord of kings" (2:47), the king didn't surrender to Yahweh as the only God. We see this play out in chapter 3, when Nebuchadnezzar challenged Yahweh—king versus King. In a great display of arrogance, the king ordered all people to bow before a newly built statue, much like the one from his dream and likely representing either his god or himself. But three Hebrew men refused to bow based on their conviction that God was the only God, and in doing so, the men committed treason.

THEOLOGY CONNECTION



Sanctification

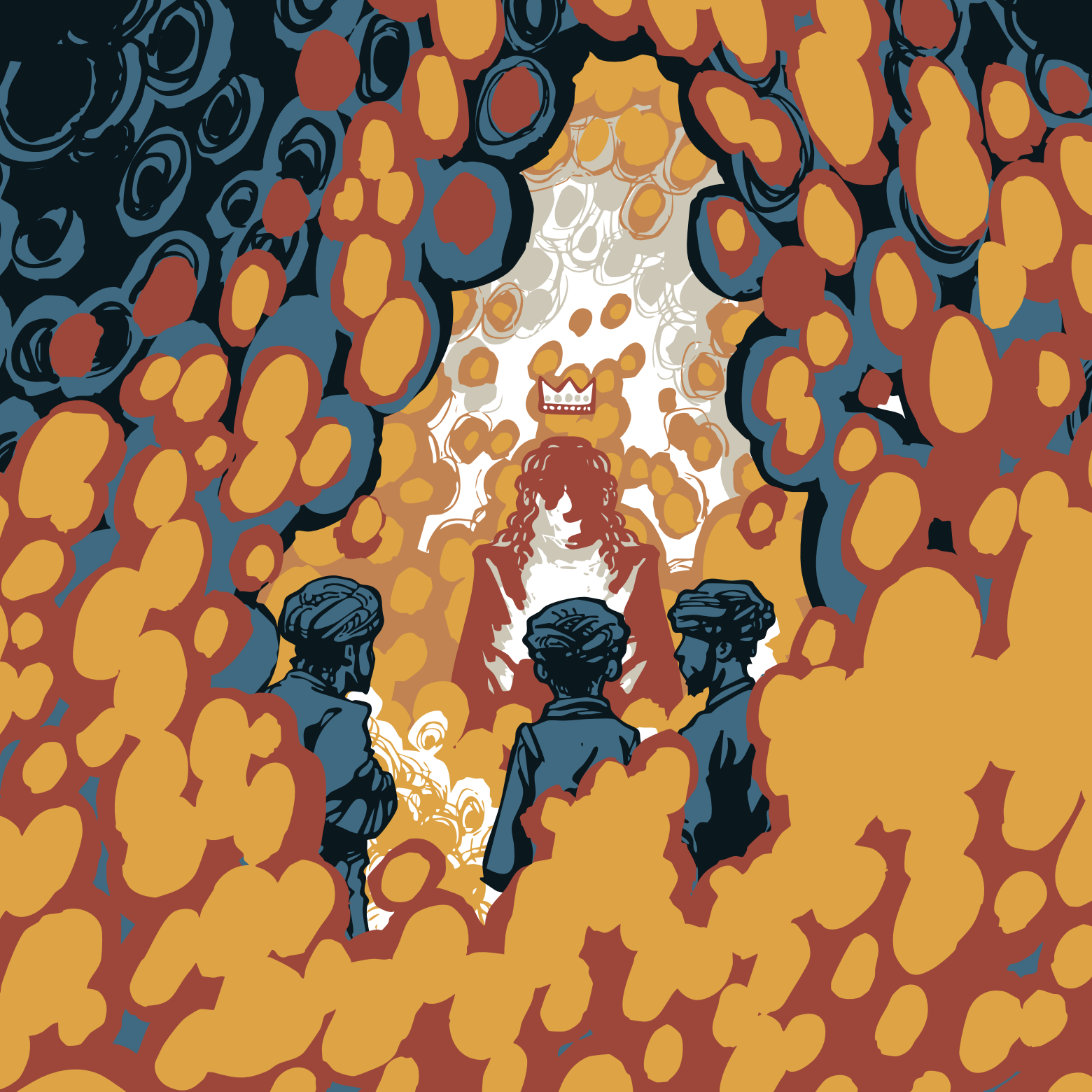
Sanctification is the process, beginning in regeneration, by which the believer is set apart to God's purposes and is enabled to progress toward moral and spiritual maturity through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit dwelling in him or her. Growth in grace should continue throughout the believer's life.



LEADERS' PRAYER

GOD, RATHER THAN BOWING TO THE GODS OF THIS CULTURE, WE BOW TO YOU ALONE. HELP US TO STAND, EVEN WHEN IT'S COSTLY. HELP US TO MODEL FOR OUR STUDENTS HOW TO FOLLOW YOU AND WORSHIP YOU, EVEN IF WE SUFFER FOR DOING SO. YOU'RE WORTHY OF OUR DEVOTION.





KICK STARTER

RATE IT!

How courageous are you (1=Not at all; 10=Nothing scares me)?



These optional activities are designed to help your students interact. You'll find a Discussion Activity and a Cultural Connection, which touches on a relevant topic in today's teen culture. Each group is different, so adapt these activities to fit your group's needs. The goal is for students to connect more to the lesson as they connect to the topic and to one another.

1

COURAGEOUS OR NAH?

SUPPLIES LIST: NONE

Ask the following questions, allowing time for students to share responses:

- **WHO IS THE MOST COURAGEOUS PERSON YOU KNOW?**
- **WHEN HAVE YOU NEEDED COURAGE TO DO SOMETHING?**
- **WHEN HAVE YOU FAILED TO DO SOMETHING BECAUSE YOU WEREN'T COURAGEOUS?**

Courage is willingness to do something even when it's frightening or risky. It's taking action even when you may not feel strong enough or ready enough. You may know courageous people who stood against all odds, but maybe you don't think of yourself as courageous. In reality, all of us can be courageous when we remember God's faithfulness. Today, we'll read about three Hebrew men who risked their lives to stand boldly for their faith.

2

CULTURAL CONNECTION

Why does it matter that you have a right understanding of who God is? For instance, if you simply believe He is real, He created all things, and He sent Jesus to save us from our sin, then isn't that enough? First, these are important foundational truths for sure. But, if this is all you know about God, then you may be vulnerable when life hurts. In fact, the reason so many believers fail to stand boldly is because they know so little about God beyond these basic truths. Here's why it's so important to have a good understanding of God's character: When you know God and understand His good character, then you'll never imagine not trusting Him. When you know God intimately, then you'll live boldly and courageously. Why? Because His character is unfailing. He is steady, unchanged by your circumstances. When you know Him—really know Him—you'll be able to endure pain and loss yet remain faithful. Your circumstances, even when they hurt, will only drive you toward God and not away from Him. The best part? You get to know Him. You could spend the rest of your life getting to know Him and still have more to discover. Do the work. Discover God through His Word, and never stop.

DISCUSSION

MAIN POINT.

Even when our faithfulness is risky, God is able to deliver us.

FAITHFULNESS WILL COST US

READ DANIEL 3:4-6,14-18

NEBUCHADNEZZAR KNEW THE HEBREW MEN WORSHIPED GOD, SO WHAT WAS HIS PROBLEM WITH THEM?

Nebuchadnezzar lived in a polytheistic culture, which means he believed in many gods. **His issue wasn't so much that the Hebrews worshiped God but that they weren't willing to worship his gods too (3:14).** In a sense, he demanded polytheism. Believers today face similar demands. Culture is okay with us believing in and worshiping God, but it pushes us to tolerate, embrace, and bow to cultural idols too. Our belief in Jesus as the only way to salvation causes tension (Acts 4:12). **God is either Lord or not—no middle ground, no gray area. If He is Lord, then nothing else—no one else—is.**



WHAT DID THE MEN BELIEVE ABOUT GOD? HOW DO OUR BELIEFS ABOUT GOD AFFECT OUR WILLINGNESS TO STAND?

The three men believed God was powerful enough to deliver them. They believed God was greater than the king of Babylon and greater than the fire they faced for defying his decree. **Here's the truth: These men knew God. And knowing God's character made them willing to stand.** They believed God was better than bowing before an idol to save their lives. The men trusted in God's plan even if it meant they burned alive for His glory to be revealed. Their devotion wasn't based on their survival but on God's lordship. **If we know God—if we truly know His character—nothing can keep us from standing when others bow.**



WHY DO WE DOUBT GOD IF HE ALLOWS US TO REMAIN IN THE FIRE—STRUGGLES, PAIN, OR SUFFERING? HOW CAN WE TRUST HIM *EVEN IF* (V. 18) WE SUFFER?

We doubt God because we have a weak understanding of His character. We often define God's character through our circumstances rather than through His Word, which clearly reveals His nature. Scripture and history reveal men and women who were martyred, or killed for their faith. With the exception of John (and Judas), all of the apostles were put to death for their faith in Jesus. Yet, we expect never to suffer or experience tension. And somehow, despite what we see in God's Word, we rationalize that God isn't with us if we do suffer. We think He has left us, forgotten us, or doesn't care about us. **The truth is that we don't follow a god who leaves, who forgets, who doesn't care. We follow the Lord who sees us, who walks with us, who even weeps with us.** We follow the Lord who works even our pain and suffering for His glory and for our good—knowing Him and making Him known. We will lose worldly comforts for following Jesus (Matt. 10:16-24). **But even if God allows us to remain in the fire and even if we lose our lives, we can trust Him because His character—His absolute goodness—never changes.**

FAITHFULNESS POINTS PEOPLE TO JESUS

READ DANIEL 4:24-29

HOW DID GOD USE THE MEN'S FAITHFULNESS? WHEN HAVE YOU SEEN GOD USE YOURS OR SOMEONE ELSE'S?

The three Hebrew men were defiantly faithful to God even as the furnace blazed. People witnessed their miraculous salvation, and the king issued a new decree: Anyone who spoke negatively about the Hebrew God would suffer. **Not only would other Jews experience protection, but people would know God's name! Our faithfulness helps people know His name and His character.** Our faithfulness could pave the way for someone else to be faithful or even experience salvation.



WHO IS THE FOURTH MAN IN THE FIRE (V. 25)?

Nebuchadnezzar described the fourth man in the fire as “a son of the gods.” Many scholars call this a **Christophany—an appearance of Jesus in the Old Testament**. This fourth man walked with the Hebrew men in the fire. The ropes which had bound them were undone; their clothing wasn't singed; not a single hair on their heads was harmed. Because the men were faithful, others saw the fourth man, who protected them and foreshadowed salvation in Jesus. **This scene is a beautiful reminder of God's care for us and His ability to be with us at all times because His Spirit lives within us.**



WHERE DO YOU SEE EVIDENCE IN THE PASSAGE THAT NEBUCHADNEZZAR'S HEART HADN'T CHANGED?

After what he witnessed in the furnace, Nebuchadnezzar claimed, “There is no other god who is able to rescue in this way” (v. 29). **The king said only that God was unique among other gods—that He was more powerful. Nebuchadnezzar didn't renounce other gods; he never embraced Yahweh as the only God.** He may have “experienced (as in chap. 2) conviction when he met the Most High God. However, conviction is not conversion!”⁹ The same is true for us. **We can acknowledge God exists without surrendering to Him; we can believe Jesus is real without making Him our Lord—without repenting of our sin and calling on Him for salvation.** Simply believing God is real doesn't save us, just as even demons believe in God—and shudder (James 2:19). Instead, we confess Jesus is Lord, repent of our sin, and dedicate our lives to Him. He then changes us, or sanctifies us, as we grow in our relationship with Him. **Nebuchadnezzar didn't experience change because He didn't surrender, and we won't experience change without surrender either.**

WRAP-UP



READ 3:19-23. HOW CAN YOU STAND FOR GOD WHEN YOU ALSO STAND TO LOSE SOMETHING IN THE PROCESS?

Let's get real for a minute. We're sometimes tempted to forget that these three Hebrew men were real humans. Standing for God and facing a fiery furnace couldn't have been easy for them. Did they have bold faith? Absolutely. But bold faith doesn't exempt any of us from feeling afraid. They knew dying was a real possibility. They stood to lose *everything*. Bold faith didn't keep them from the fire, but it did sustain them. How can we stand boldly when we know it'll mean walking into a fire of our own? How can we trust God when we might lose someone or something that means so much to us? **We can remember God is worthy of our trust. Why? Because He worked through all of human history to bring us a Savior.** We can look back at His faithfulness and know He will be faithful moving forward. We can lean on others who are walking the same way. Most importantly, we can lean on Jesus because He walks with us through the power of the Holy Spirit. **We're never alone, even if our faith takes us through fire (Isa. 43:2).**

INTO THE LIONS' DEN

MAIN POINT.

Even when we suffer for our faith, God remains with us.



CHRIST CONNECTION

Daniel faithfully trusted and obeyed God even at risk of his life. God rescued Daniel from death and used him to advance His kingdom. Like Daniel, Jesus faithfully trusted and obeyed God, but unlike Daniel, Jesus was not spared from death. Jesus died and was resurrected to establish the kingdom of God.



TRUSTING FOR DELIVERANCE

This week, we're covering the passages and main points below. But we encourage you to read all of the content on the timeline as you prepare to teach.

Daniel 5–6

LIVING BY FAITH SETS US APART FROM THE WORLD

DANIEL 6:7-18

7 All the high officials of the kingdom, the prefects and the satraps, the counselors and the governors are agreed that the king should establish an ordinance and enforce an injunction, that whoever makes petition to any god or man for thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions. 8 Now, O king, establish the injunction and sign the document, so that it cannot be changed, according to the law of the Medes and the Persians, which cannot be revoked." 9 Therefore King Darius signed the document and injunction. 10 When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously. 11 Then these men came by agreement and found Daniel making petition and plea before his God. 12 Then they came near and said before the king, concerning the injunction, "O king! Did you not sign an injunction, that anyone who makes petition to any god or man within thirty days except to you, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions?" The king answered and said, "The thing stands fast, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be revoked." 13 Then they answered and said before the king, "Daniel, who is one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, O king, or the injunction you have signed, but makes his petition three times a day." 14 Then the king, when he heard these words, was much distressed and set his mind to deliver Daniel. And he labored till the sun went down to rescue him. 15 Then these men came by agreement to the king and said to the king, "Know, O king, that it is a law of the Medes and Persians that no injunction or ordinance that the king establishes can be changed." 16 Then the king commanded, and Daniel was brought and cast into the den of lions. The king declared to Daniel, "May your God, whom you serve continually, deliver you!" 17 And a stone was brought and laid on the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet and with the signet of his lords, that nothing might be changed concerning Daniel. 18 Then the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting; no diversions were brought to him, and sleep fled from him.

GOD IS OUR HOPE IN SUFFERING

DANIEL 6:19-24

19 Then, at break of day, the king arose and went in haste to the den of lions. 20 As he came near to the den where Daniel was, he cried out in a tone of anguish. The king declared to Daniel, "O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to deliver you from the lions?" 21 Then Daniel said to the king, "O king, live forever! 22 My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths, and they have not harmed me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no harm." 23 Then the king was exceedingly glad, and commanded that Daniel be taken up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no kind of harm was found on him, because he had trusted in his God. 24 And the king commanded, and those men who had maliciously accused Daniel were brought and cast into the den of lions—they, their children, and their wives. And before they reached the bottom of the den, the lions overpowered them and broke all their bones in pieces.

BEFORE YOU TEACH

MAIN POINT.

Even when we suffer for our faith, God remains with us.

Leaders: If you're suffering for following Jesus, remember this promise: Jesus offers you peace because He has overcome the world (John 16:33).

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

LIVING BY FAITH SETS US APART FROM THE WORLD

DANIEL 6:10-11

“‘Daniel’s relationship with the Lord was not crisis-oriented.’ It was a consistent walk with God that people saw daily. And when emergencies or crises presented themselves, Daniel was already prepared to meet them and handle them. His daily communion with God had so shaped his character that he was ready no matter what. The decision to go to the lion’s den had been settled many years earlier. The cost had already been counted. To be untrue to his God was never an option!”¹⁰

DANIEL 6:14

“This custom of facing the temple while praying, apparently first adopted by Solomon (2 Chron. 6:34-39), dominated Jewish worship all through the monarchial period, the exile, and the restoration right up until the time of the New Testament. Nor was this some last-minute panic prayer like Peter’s fear of drowning in the Sea of Galilee. Everything about this verse tells us that Daniel regularly knelt by his window and prayed, and everybody knew about it.”¹¹

DANIEL 6:17

“Just as Daniel was sealed in the lion’s den, so also Christ was sealed in the tomb, and this was the petty human ruler’s way to seal the fate of both of these great servants of the Lord. And in both cases, that human sealing led to greater glory for God, when He brought Daniel up out of the pit and He raised Christ up out of the tomb.”¹²

GOD IS OUR HOPE IN SUFFERING

DANIEL 6:19-20

“More than just the rescue of a friend, this was a test of deity. Darius knew of no gods who could stop the mouths of lions. If Daniel’s God could do that, then the king’s theology needed some reconstruction.”¹³

CONTEXT



Nebuchadnezzar continued to show pride, even after witnessing God intervene in the fiery furnace. After asking Daniel to interpret another dream, the king went insane and ate grass like cattle, until he acknowledged Yahweh as the Ruler over all kingdoms (4:28-37). God humbled Nebuchadnezzar in a very public manner. The final Babylonian king, Belshazzar, also assumed that he and his gods were greater than Yahweh. In Daniel 5, Belshazzar hosted a drunken party and ordered the vessels taken from the temple in Jerusalem, sacred objects used in worship, to be used as goblets for wine—a profane act mocking Judah’s God. That night, God spoke through writing on a wall, which Daniel interpreted: Belshazzar’s kingdom was ending; his rule was deficient; and the Medes and Persians would overtake him. The Persians took King Belshazzar’s life that very night, and Babylon fell, just as Jeremiah prophesied (Jer. 50–51). Daniel’s continued rise in rank provoked jealousy from other administrators. They found no fault with Daniel but crafted a plan, one which landed Daniel in the lions’ den at well over eighty years old.

Theophany: God appearing to humans in a visible or physical way, sometimes in angelic or human form, accompanied by natural elements like fire, smoke, or light.

THEOLOGY CONNECTION



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.

LEADERS’ PRAYER

GOD, SUSTAIN US WHEN OUR FAITH LEADS TO SUFFERING—WHEN OUR STUDENTS SUFFER FOR THEIR FAITH. HELP US CLING TO THE PROMISE THAT YOU’VE OVERCOME THE WORLD. HELP US TO DEVELOP SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE SO THAT STANDING FAITHFULLY IS AS NATURAL TO US AS BREATHING.



KICK STARTER

♥ HEART CHECK

Last week, we talked about **standing for God** even if we lose something in the process. When did you stand for your faith in the last week? Do you remember a time when you should've stood but didn't? How can you work through guilt that comes with not standing? What can you do to stand next time?

These optional activities are designed to help your students interact. You'll find a Discussion Activity and a Cultural Connection, which touches on a relevant topic in today's teen culture. Each group is different, so adapt these activities to fit your group's needs. The goal is for students to connect more to the lesson as they connect to the topic and to one another.

1

FORMING HABITS

SUPPLIES LIST: NONE

Ask the following questions, allowing time for students to share responses:

- **WHAT ARE SOME OF YOUR DAILY HABITS?**
- **IS IT EASIER TO FORM GOOD OR BAD HABITS? WHY?**
- **HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE FOR SOMETHING TO BECOME A HABIT?**

Maybe you wake up at the same time each day or have a skincare routine. Maybe you follow a workout schedule. We don't form habits overnight but by consistently practicing certain routines over time. We form spiritual habits when we intentionally and consistently practice them over time too. Then, when the time comes for us to stand boldly, we can do so.

2

CULTURAL CONNECTION

What do we do if rules or laws contradict God's Word? If you've ever been caught between the two, then you likely felt confused. Which way do we go when a school rule goes against God's Word? What can we do if our coaches or our parents—who may be unbelievers—place expectations on us that contradict the way God wants us to live? First, know you aren't alone; many believers walk a similar path. The pressure we experience from worldly authority feels overwhelming because the consequences are often immediate. The simple, yet difficult answer: God's Word is first. Always. Even when it's hard. Even if we're the only one. Scripture clearly says we should obey authority because God allowed it to be put in place (Rom. 13:1-7). But when authority asks us to do something God has forbidden or demands that we stop doing something God has commanded, we must follow the Lord (Acts 5:27-29). We shine as lights in a dark world when we obey authority, but we submit to God's authority before any other.

DISCUSSION

MAIN POINT.

Even when we suffer for our faith, God remains with us.

LIVING BY FAITH SETS US APART FROM THE WORLD

READ DANIEL 6:7-18

WHAT IS SELF-DISCIPLINE? WHY IS IT DIFFICULT FOR US?

Being disciplined is being consistent and self-controlled. Spiritual discipline is being faithful even when we don't feel like it, regardless of the cost. **We struggle to be disciplined because it requires us to put aside our own desires and to keep going when we want to give up.** When Darius signed the edict prohibiting prayer, Daniel could've taken time off from praying or even prayed in hiding, but he was disciplined. **Daniel consistently honored God in Babylon, and he didn't stop when doing so was dangerous—not for the king, not for anyone.** He had spent his life developing spiritual discipline, which enabled him to stand at all times.



CAN WE REALLY BE GODLY IN TODAY'S SINFUL CULTURE? HOW DID DANIEL'S LIFE SHOW US THIS IS POSSIBLE?

Daniel lived the words of 1 Peter 2:11-12. He lived such an honorable life among pagans that they couldn't find anything slanderous in him. The king was impressed by Daniel's faithfulness even though he didn't follow Daniel's God. **God calls us to be faithful everywhere—in our Babylon, in school, in our families, on our teams. Our faithfulness affects those watching our lives, pointing people to the reason we're faithful—to Jesus.** Daniel's story proves that we can be faithful to the Lord, regardless of our surrounding culture. **Culture isn't our excuse to sin but rather even more reason to shine.**



JESUS PROMISED HIS FOLLOWERS WOULD FACE OPPOSITION AND SUFFERING (JOHN 16:33). WHAT DOES IT SAY IF WE NEVER SUFFER—IF OUR ACTIONS, WORDS, OR VIEWS NEVER OFFEND AN UNGODLY CULTURE?

Our aim should never be to look for an argument or to cause friction on purpose; in fact, Scripture calls believers to be agents of peace, if possible (Rom. 12:18). We do damage to God's reputation and cause division when our motive is to provoke an argument; this doesn't honor Jesus. However, **Jesus was very clear about the reality of His followers facing persecution and suffering for His name's sake.** If we live godly lives in a sinful world, then we shouldn't be surprised when we face opposition and suffering (1 Pet. 4:12-19; 2 Tim. 3:12). So, if we never experience this, then what does that mean? If people—even unbelievers—always support our actions, words, and views, then we may need to assess whether or not we're living like Jesus called us to live. The truth is that God's Word is offensive to an unbelieving world; it cuts through our pretense and points out sin (Heb. 4:12). **Living for God often means we live counter-culturally. If we never encounter tension because of our faith, then we need to check to see if we're living it out. We must ask if others can tell us apart from those who don't confess Jesus as Lord.**

GOD IS OUR HOPE IN SUFFERING

READ DANIEL 6:19-24

WHAT ARE SOME WAYS DANIEL COULD'VE TRIED TO FIGHT THIS BATTLE HIMSELF INSTEAD OF TRUSTING IN GOD?

The king admired Daniel. He held an elevated position in the kingdom. He could've leveraged that position to fight for himself. He could've stopped praying for thirty days and justified that God surely would understand, since his life was at stake. He could've prayed in a place not so visible. **But Daniel chose not to fight the battle; rather, he made the firm decision to be faithful and to allow God to protect him. Daniel trusted, as he had in the past, that even if God didn't spare him, he would die faithfully living for the Lord.**



WHAT SITUATIONS CAUSE PEOPLE TO DOUBT GOD IS WITH THEM? WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE FOR GOD TO BE WITH US?

Saying God is with us sounds good, but knowing He is with us when we're struggling can be difficult. God kindly sat with Daniel through the night, either through sending an angel, through preincarnate Christ, or through a theophany, when God appears to humans in some way, possibly in human form. **God kindly stays with us through the Holy Spirit.** We may struggle to feel God's presence, but He gave us this guidance: "Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you" (James 4:8). **When you consistently position yourself near the Lord through prayer, worship, and His Word, you'll experience intimate connection to His Spirit—His very real presence.**



DANIEL WAS UNHARMED BECAUSE HE TRUSTED GOD (V. 23)? WHY DO WE STRUGGLE TO DO SO?

Daniel was unharmed because "he had trusted in his God." More than that, he trusted that even if deliverance didn't happen there in the lions' den—if it didn't look like what he hoped but instead came by way of death—he would enter God's presence. Sometimes, we struggle to trust the Lord. We want to see Him; we want to know His plans; we want to see where those plans lead. But faith is a deep trust in the Lord that doesn't depend on sight. **Faith overflows because we know who God is: faithful, loving, kind, caring. We can trust God with our deepest fears because He has already delivered us from the worst—separation from Him because of our sin—through the death of His Son. We're delivered because God didn't spare His Son.** If we don't experience deliverance from pain here, we can be certain of better deliverance waiting for us in eternity.

WRAP-UP



ASSESS YOUR SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE: HOW IS THE WAY YOU'RE LIVING NOW PREPARING YOU EITHER TO STAND OR TO FALL WHEN YOU FACE OPPOSITION?

Daniel didn't decide suddenly to be faithful to God when the king signed the decree. Instead, Daniel did "as he had done previously" (v. 10)—he prayed to God. He did what he had been doing all his life—even in exile. **You can't expect to stand in the difficult moments—in moments of pain, suffering, sickness, persecution, betrayal, loss, temptation—if you aren't forming habits now to strengthen your faith.** The truth is that what you do right now determines what you will do later. If you invest in your relationship with God now, then you'll know Him more deeply. You form stronger faith in God in every small moment, in the habits you create, in the discipline to pray and read God's Word each day. **You won't be able to summon enough faith and deep trust in the Lord in your moment of opposition or suffering; rather, you must work now to build it.**

AN EVERLASTING DOMINION

MAIN POINT.

Even when worldly kingdoms fall, God's kingdom lasts forever.



CHRIST CONNECTION

Daniel saw the coming of the Son of Man who would be given dominion over an everlasting kingdom of every people, nation, and language. Jesus is the Son of Man, the King of kings, who purchased a people for God through His life, death, and resurrection.



EVERLASTING KINGDOM

This week, we're covering the passages and main points below. But we encourage you to read all of the content on the timeline as you prepare to teach.

Daniel 7–12

WORLDLY KINGDOMS ARE TEMPORARY

DANIEL 7:1-8

1 In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel saw a dream and visions of his head as he lay in his bed. Then he wrote down the dream and told the sum of the matter. 2 Daniel declared, "I saw in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea. 3 And four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another. 4 The first was like a lion and had eagles' wings. Then as I looked its wings were plucked off, and it was lifted up from the ground and made to stand on two feet like a man, and the mind of a man was given to it. 5 And behold, another beast, a second one, like a bear. It was raised up on one side. It had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth; and it was told, 'Arise, devour much flesh.' 6 After this I looked, and behold, another, like a leopard, with four wings of a bird on its back. And the beast had four heads, and dominion was given to it. 7 After this I saw in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth; it devoured and broke in pieces and stamped what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns. 8 I considered the horns, and behold, there came up among them another horn, a little one, before which three of the first horns were plucked up by the roots. And behold, in this horn were eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth speaking great things."

GOD'S KINGDOM IS EVERLASTING

DANIEL 7:9-14

9 "As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. 10 A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened. 11 I looked then because of the sound of the great words that the horn was speaking. And as I looked, the beast was killed, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire. 12 As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time. 13 I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. 14 And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed."

BEFORE YOU TEACH

MAIN POINT.

Even when worldly kingdoms fall, God's kingdom lasts forever.

Leaders: You or your students may struggle with real brokenness in this world. Consider listening to “Is He Worthy?” by Shane and Shane and sharing it with your students. Jesus will return to make all things new!

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

WORLDLY KINGDOMS ARE TEMPORARY

DANIEL 7:2

“Wind is mentioned more than 120 times in the Bible. More than half of those point to the sovereignty and power of God. Indeed, that is the only way Daniel uses the word.”¹⁴

“That the four winds of the compass (north, south, east, and west) are here referred to as the ‘winds of heaven’ teaches us this is God’s doing. ‘The great sea’ should be understood symbolically as the raging chaos, confusion, and conflict among the nations of the world.”¹⁵

DANIEL 7:3

“In verse 17 the angel explains that they symbolize ‘four kingdoms’ that will rise from the earth (‘sea’). They are the same empires represented by the statue’s four parts in chap. 2. Daniel 7 merely provides more detailed information concerning them.”¹⁶

GOD’S KINGDOM IS EVERLASTING

DANIEL 7:13-14

“Now in addition to the Ancient of Days, Daniel sees one like a son of man. Jesus used this phrase of himself (with the definite article) twenty-seven times in Luke alone. If we had only this phrase in Daniel, we might interpret this verse to mean that the one who approached the Ancient of Days looked like a human being. But in the light of the New Testament we know immediately it means much more. The image of clouds takes us back to Sinai (Ex. 16:10) and forward to prophecy yet unfulfilled (Matt. 24:30). . . . Before our very eyes Daniel describes human history up to the first coming of Christ and then jumps over centuries to the end of the age and the revival of the fourth empire. But the focus of all of this is hardly the little horn or any of the beastly kingdoms. Staring at us from the center of the chapter is the description of the Ancient of Days and the everlasting kingdom of Jesus.”¹⁷



CONTEXT

Daniel 7 marks a shift in the book from third-person historical account to first-person testimony of visions and prophecies—of what God will do one day. Through flashback, Daniel recalls a vision (a parallel to the vision in chap. 2) that took place well before the events in Daniel 5–6, at approximately 553 BC under Belshazzar’s rule—a time when many Jews worried about their future as a broken, nonexistent nation.¹⁸ The second half of Daniel is full of symbolism and imagery and contains apocalyptic, predictive prophesy. These chapters can be difficult to interpret and often leave readers wondering what these visions meant for the Jews in exile and for God’s people today. For Daniel’s fellow exiles, these visions offered reminders of God’s sovereignty and His promise to one day restore Israel. God used prophets like Daniel to assure His people that He had not forgotten them and that a coming Messiah would deliver them and reign over all the earth. Believers today can be encouraged by these visions because they offer hope of God’s coming kingdom—one that will last for eternity, enjoyed by people from every nation and tribe.

Eschatology: The doctrine of the last things describes how God’s plan unfolds, what happens to people and angels, and the transition from this age to the next.¹⁹

THEOLOGY CONNECTION

Special Revelation

Special revelation refers to God’s revealing Himself to humanity through historical events, His Word, and through Jesus Christ. Through special revelation, human beings learn about God’s character, His will, His purpose for creation, and His plan of redemption. Special revelation shows us the nature and character of God, and because God has revealed Himself in this way, we can know Him—through a saving relationship with Him in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

LEADERS’ PRAYER

GOD, THANK YOU FOR GIVING US GLIMPSES INTO YOUR PLANS FOR US. WE CAN WALK THROUGH WORLDLY SUFFERING WITH THE ASSURANCE OF A BETTER KINGDOM WAITING FOR US—A KINGDOM WHICH LASTS FOREVER.



KICK STARTER

DID YOU KNOW?

The ancient Greeks believed in a creature they called “Chimera”—a female monster with the body of a lion, the head of a goat sprouting from its back, and a tail that ended with a snake’s head. Oh, and she breathed fire like a dragon! Even crazier than this is the vision Daniel sees in the passage today!²⁰

These optional activities are designed to help your students interact. You'll find a Discussion Activity and a Cultural Connection, which touches on a relevant topic in today's teen culture. Each group is different, so adapt these activities to fit your group's needs. The goal is for students to connect more to the lesson as they connect to the topic and to one another.

1

BROKEN AND REPAIRED

SUPPLIES LIST: NONE

Ask the following questions, allowing time for students to share responses:

- **WHEN HAVE YOU BROKEN SOMETHING REALLY VALUABLE?**
- **WHAT IS SOMETHING THAT CAN'T BE REPAIRED IF IT BREAKS?**
- **WHO DO YOU GO TO WHEN YOU NEED SOMETHING FIXED?**

We've probably all broken something valuable. Sometimes, we're able to fix what we broke; sometimes, we know someone else who is great at fixing what's broken; sometimes, what's broken is ruined beyond repair. The truth is that this world and the kingdoms of this world are broken, and one day, they'll all fall. Only one kingdom will remain, as we'll see in today's passage.

2

CULTURAL CONNECTION

Do you ever wonder why God allows evil rulers to rule? Since God has authority over everything, why doesn't He just prevent evil people from having any power in this world? It's okay to ask this question. Honestly, asking this question shows that you recognize God is good, and what you're wrestling with is mostly the problem of evil. No ruler has authority without God giving it (Rom. 13:1). At times, God has allowed evil rulers to act as judgment against His people for their sin—like the kings we've been reading about in Daniel. We don't always know why God allows evil humans to take power, but we do know that our good God works all things for His glory and for our ultimate good—the good of the gospel (Rom. 8:28). We also know that God holds those evil leaders accountable and judges them for their sins. They may have the temporary opportunity to lead immorally and cruelly, but their kingdoms will fall; they will give an account for their sin.

DISCUSSION

MAIN POINT.

Even when worldly kingdoms fall, God's kingdom lasts forever.

WORLDLY KINGDOMS ARE TEMPORARY

READ DANIEL 7:1-8



WHAT COULD THE BEASTS REPRESENT?

The four beasts in this vision represented different worldly kingdoms (v. 17), likely Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. Each one rose and fell to the next, with the fourth being the most powerful—and the most terrible. We should notice the harsh and violent words Daniel used to describe the beasts and their methods for overthrowing one another. **God used this vision, or special revelation, to ensure Daniel that He was still sovereign over everything, though these worldly powers caused terror for His people.** Nothing happened without God's knowledge and authority—even Babylon exiling His people—and these kingdoms wouldn't last.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE WORLD IN THIS TEXT? DO YOU EVER FEEL LIKE GOD DOESN'T HAVE CONTROL OVER OUR WORLD TODAY?

What Daniel saw unsettled and terrified him (v. 15). The world in Daniel's vision was chaotic and violent, but the reality was that God was in control. When our world or our life feels chaotic and unsteady—maybe even unsafe—we may wonder if God maintains control. We may question His authority. **We must always remember that our feelings, and even what we see, often are not the reality.** While the beasts in Daniel's vision appeared powerful and in control, they were weak and temporary. **God was and always is in control over the state of the world and over our lives.**



WHAT DO YOUR WORLDLY KINGDOMS LOOK LIKE? WHY IS IT DANGEROUS TO POUR OURSELVES INTO BUILDING THEM?

Sure, our world consists of national kingdoms, but we're building kingdoms of our own too. **We build up little empires and seat ourselves on thrones at the center. We build our kingdoms on all that makes life comfortable here—on our worldly desires.** Maybe you've built a kingdom on the unstable ground of your sports, your academic achievements, your goals. Maybe your kingdom sits on top of the shifting sands of popularity, culture, social media; they dictate the way you live and look. They make the rules for your empire, which feels safe and secure for now. Or maybe it doesn't. Reading about the outcome of worldly kingdoms in Daniel's vision should trigger something in us: Our personal worldly empires will fail. **If we pour ourselves into building up our status and popularity, our worldly successes and accomplishments, our name, then we're investing in a kingdom which will crumble into dust and be left in ruins.** God calls us to build His kingdom—the one built on the firm foundation of Jesus, the Rock and Cornerstone of our salvation (Ps. 62:2; Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Pet. 2:6).

GOD'S KINGDOM IS EVERLASTING

READ DANIEL 7:9-14

WHAT IS THE “ANCIENT OF DAYS” LIKE? WHO IS HE?

Daniel is the only one to call God, “Ancient of Days,” but all of Scripture confirms God’s eternal existence. He is “from everlasting to everlasting” (Ps. 90:2), which means God is from eternity past to eternity future; He has always been and always will be! **God took a seat on His throne—perfectly sovereign, perfectly in control. His white clothing signifies absolute purity and holiness; His white hair represents eternal existence and wisdom.** This is our God whom “a thousand thousands served” and before whom “ten thousand times ten thousand stood.” This is our God who reigns forever!



READ MATTHEW 24:29-31 AND PHILIPPIANS 2:9-11. WHO IS THE “ONE LIKE A SON OF MAN”? WHAT CONNECTIONS DO YOU SEE TO DANIEL’S VISION?

These verses clearly display God the Father and His Son, Jesus. **We get a glimpse into the throne room of heaven, where God gifted Jesus His universal, everlasting kingdom, which will one day be on earth as it is in heaven.** Jesus spoke of Himself as the “Son of Man” and explained that He would return on the clouds to bring His kingdom, where He will reign forever (see also Mark 14:61-62). God exalted His Son, and one day, every knee will bow before Him.



READ VERSES 15-27. WHAT DO YOU THINK GOD WANTED THE EXILES (AND US) TO KNOW FROM THIS VISION?

Leaders: Share the definition of eschatology. Daniel received this vision during exile, when God’s people lived as slaves, controlled by ruthless kings. In this passage, the “saints” lived under similarly terrifying conditions sometime in the future—“until the Ancient of Days came” (v. 22)! Notice when the atmosphere shifted—when God arrived to right all wrongs and to judge those who tormented His people. **If the exiles believed this was true, then they could live with hope; if we believe this is true, then we can trust God with our present or future suffering. In other words, “our lives should reflect our eschatology.”²¹ Our beliefs about the future shape how we live now: “Christian obedience, therefore, is grounded not merely in what God has done but also in what God will do.”²²** How should we live, then? As holy, godly, expectant people—because we know the Ancient of Days is coming to bring a better kingdom (2 Pet. 3:11-13).

WRAP-UP



HOW CAN DANIEL’S VISION ENCOURAGE YOU WHEN YOUR WORLD FEELS CHAOTIC, UNSTEADY, OR WRECKED?

Right now, you may feel like your world is falling apart. Your home life may be terrible. You may be experiencing a major change that you didn’t want. You may be suffering the loss of someone you loved. You may be experiencing some type of abuse or neglect (and if this is so, please reach out to a trusted adult). Or maybe you look at the world around you—at wars, at crime, at hatred and injustice—and what you see feels unsteady, like everything could crumble at any moment. Here’s the truth: **Things *are* going to crumble. The kingdoms of this world won’t last. Praise God! Everything that is wrong here will one day be made right again because of our wonderful, holy, righteous Savior. He is going to return, and He’ll restore what is broken and make it all new again. If your life or your world feels broken—it likely is. But cling to what you know God has promised: Jesus is coming soon, and His kingdom will be beautiful, safe, and whole. We will possess the kingdom, too, because we are coheirs with Jesus (Rom. 8:16-18).**

GATHERED AS ONE

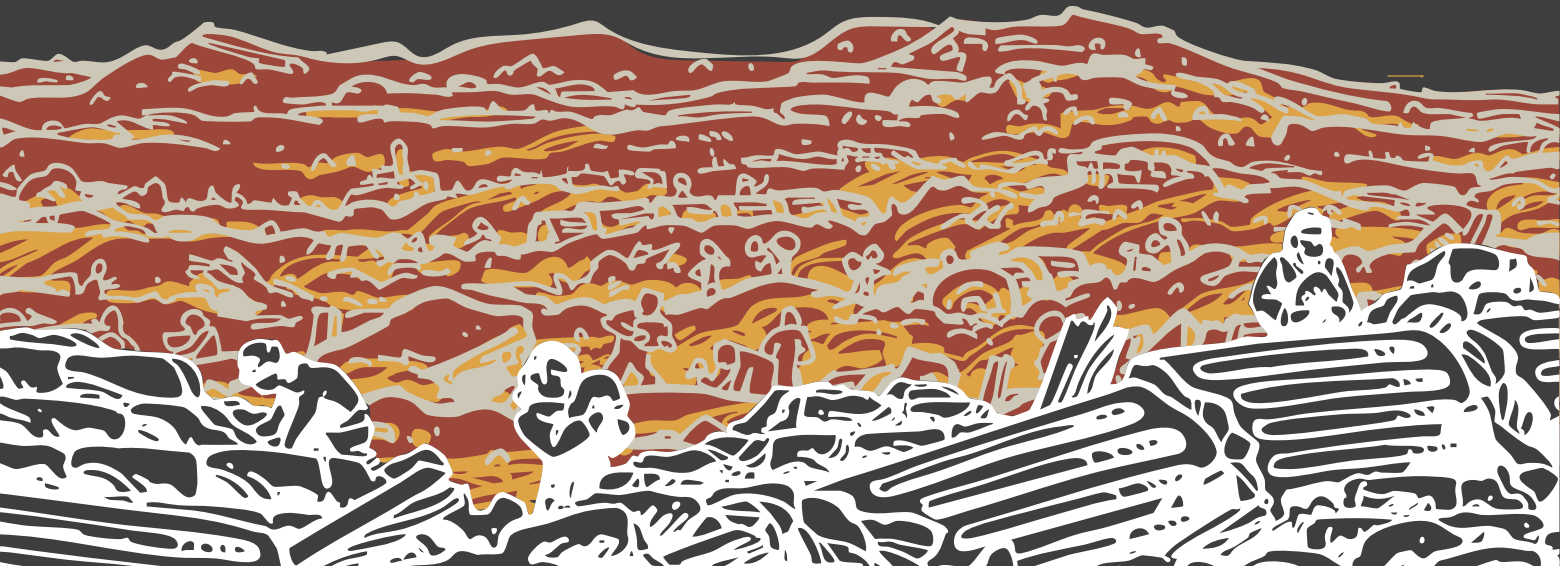
MAIN POINT.

God meets us in our brokenness and restores us.



CHRIST CONNECTION

God kept His promise to bring His people out of exile from 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.



RETURNING HOME

This week, we're covering the passages and main points below. But we encourage you to read all of the content on the timeline as you prepare to teach.

Ezra 1–3

GOD IS FAITHFUL TO HIS PROMISES

EZRA 1:1-8

1 In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing: 2 “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. 3 Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem. 4 And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.” 5 Then rose up the heads of the fathers’ houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem. 6 And all who were about them aided them with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, with beasts, and with costly wares, besides all that was freely offered. 7 Cyrus the king also brought out the vessels of the house of the LORD that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods. 8 Cyrus king of Persia brought these out in the charge of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah.

GOD RESTORES BROKENNESS

EZRA 3:1-6,10-13

1 When the seventh month came, and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem. 2 Then arose Jeshua the son of Jozadak, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel with his kinsmen, and they built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the Law of Moses the man of God. 3 They set the altar in its place, for fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands, and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening. 4 And they kept the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number according to the rule, as each day required, 5 and after that the regular burnt offerings, the offerings at the new moon and at all the appointed feasts of the LORD, and the offerings of everyone who made a freewill offering to the LORD. 6 From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD. But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid. . . . 10 And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the directions of David king of Israel. 11 And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, “For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.” And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. 12 But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers’ houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, 13 so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.

BEFORE YOU TEACH

MAIN POINT.

God meets us in our brokenness and restores us.

Leaders: Even now, human history bends and moves at God's command; we can trust Him.

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

GOD IS FAITHFUL TO HIS PROMISES

EZRA 1:1

"The decree sounds as though Cyrus were a true believer in the God of Israel. But other inscriptions indicate that Cyrus followed a consistent policy of honoring the religions and customs of his different subject peoples."¹

EZRA 1:1-8

"God's recurrent action in Israel's history proved to the postexilic community that they represented the continuation of God's redemptive plan. God's providential care is repeatedly emphasized. It was God who was responsible for the decree of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1, 'The LORD moved the heart of Cyrus'). . . . God frustrated the plans of the Jews' enemies and preserved this community. Just as we find throughout the prophetic books and the whole Bible, the author of Ezra-Nehemiah interpreted history in terms of God's actions."²

GOD RESTORES BROKENNESS

EZRA 3:1-3

"Now look at why they built the altar: because they were afraid of their threatening neighbors. Then look at what they do: they start offering sacrifices on that altar. Why are they acting this way? Why aren't they trying to protect themselves and their homes and their wives and their children? They are! These returnees have had their spirits stirred by God (Ezra 1:5). They seem to have learned from Israel's history. All the attempts to rely on the arm of the flesh—on help from Egypt, Assyria, or Babylon—got the temple burned down. All that reliance on man rather than God got them driven off their land into exile in Babylon. These returning exiles have learned what they can and cannot trust. They can trust God; they cannot trust man."³

EZRA 3:2-3

"When the first group of exiles returned from Babylon, they first built an altar to sacrifice to God; only afterwards did they build the temple. Still later they built the walls. This priority is correct; worship and a correct relation to God must be at the center of our personal lives and the believing community."⁴



CONTEXT

Background: Jewish tradition names Ezra, a scribe and priest, as the author of Ezra (and possibly parts of Nehemiah and 1–2 Chronicles). Ezra–Nehemiah was a single book until around 4 AD. Ezra narrated two phases of the exodus from Babylon—one led by Zerubbabel and another led by Ezra. Instead of finding the first wave of returnees (roughly 40,000 people) living faithfully for the Lord, Ezra returned almost sixty years later to find them living in rebellion and marrying people from surrounding tribes. Israel’s pattern of blending with pagan nations was still a problem. Ezra worked to restore God’s people to God’s Word and to right worship. They had returned to a land that was destroyed; their presence in the region had shrunk, but other pagan tribes had expanded. For Israel to survive, the people needed to live out their God-given identity, but many of them had forgotten how to do so. Ezra committed himself to reminding Israel that the God who began a good work in creating a people for Himself was still working—still keeping His covenant, still blessing them, still calling them to worship only Him, still enforcing His law. Ezra was instrumental in helping them remember.

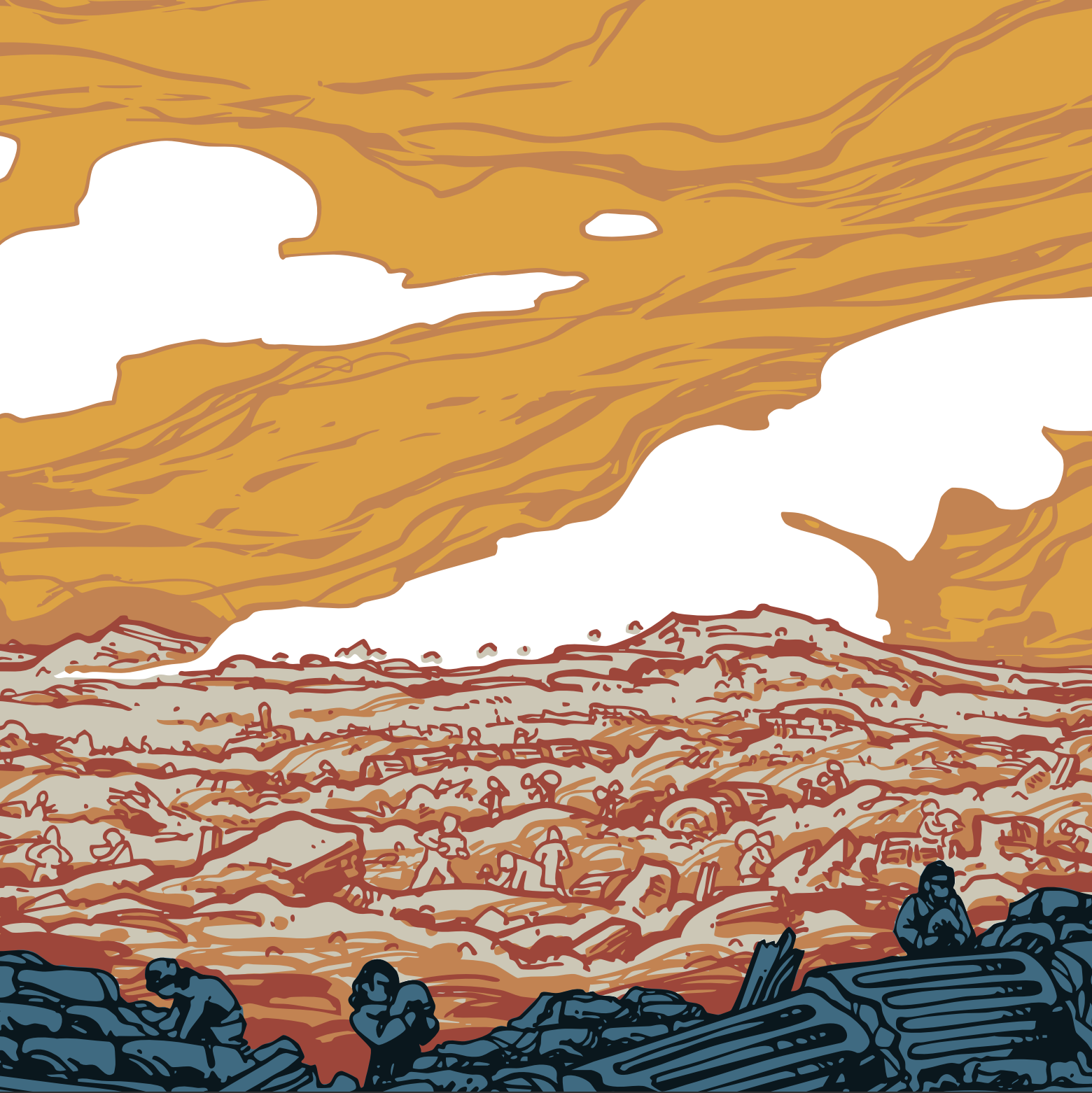
THEOLOGY CONNECTION

Cooperation

Members of New Testament churches should cooperate with one another in carrying forward the missionary, educational, and compassion ministries for the growth of Christ’s kingdom. Christian unity in the New Testament sense is spiritual harmony and voluntary cooperation for common ends by various groups of Christ’s people.

LEADERS’ PRAYER

GOD, WE OFTEN NEED REMINDING THAT YOU WORK THROUGH EVEN THE DARKEST PARTS OF HUMAN HISTORY TO BRING ABOUT YOUR PERFECT PLANS. THANK YOU FOR THE WAYS YOU WORK THROUGH THE DARKEST PARTS OF OUR LIVES TO BRING ABOUT OUR SALVATION AND YOUR GOOD PLANS FOR US. THANK YOU FOR SHOWING US HOW YOU’VE FULFILLED YOUR WORD.



KICK STARTER

RATE IT!

On a scale of 1-10, how much does your accent reveal where you're from (1=Not at all; 10=Can't hide it)?



These optional activities are designed to help your students interact. You'll find a Discussion Activity and a Cultural Connection, which touches on a relevant topic in today's teen culture. Each group is different, so adapt these activities to fit your group's needs. The goal is for students to connect more to the lesson as they connect to the topic and to one another.

1

DISPLACED AND DISAPPOINTED

SUPPLIES LIST: NONE

Ask the following questions, allowing time for students to share responses (use caution, as some students may have experienced these situations):

- **HAVE YOU EVER SEEN SOMEONE BE DISPLACED FROM HIS OR HER HOME BECAUSE OF A FIRE, NATURAL DISASTER, OR SOME OTHER EVENT (EX. HURRICANE)?**
- **HOW DO YOU THINK IT WOULD FEEL TO RETURN TO A HOME THAT WAS DESTROYED?**
- **WOULD YOU WANT TO REBUILD OR MOVE SOMEWHERE ELSE FOR A FRESH START?**

If you've ever been displaced from your home because of a natural disaster or tragedy, then you know how horrific it is—how disappointing it can feel to return to ruins. God's people experienced this on a grand scale. They returned home from exile, but their loss was still evident. Even in the ruins and rubble, God's promises to restore them were true, as we'll see in today's lesson.

2

CULTURAL CONNECTION

How much does where you're from impact your identity? How much do your family, friends, and activities shape you? Do you ever wonder if you'd be the same person if you lived in a different place, with a different family, or in different circumstances? Considering how much external factors affect our identity helps us discover who we are. God formed Israel for Himself. Israel's identity was supposed to be in the Lord—in living distinctly from the rest of the world by following God's law. Instead, the people often ignored their God-given identity and chose to imitate pagan nations surrounding them. After living for seventy years exiled in Babylon, many of them may have struggled with their identity. If they were born in Babylon, were they Israelites still? Were they also Babylonian? Who were they, really? Maybe you've asked this question too. Here's the truth: God created you. He delights in you. You are your truest self when you live out your identity as God's child—as a follower of Jesus living by God's Word. Circumstances change, but your identity never does when you root it in the Lord.

DISCUSSION

MAIN POINT.

God meets us in our brokenness and restores us.

GOD IS FAITHFUL TO HIS PROMISES

READ EZRA 1:1-8

CAN GOD WORK THROUGH UNBELIEVERS? HOW DOES HE DO THIS TODAY?

God stirred a pagan king's heart to release His people from Babylon (then conquered by Persia). **Let's not miss this: God pressed on a nonbeliever to bring about His will!** If God did this in Babylon, then He can do this today. God is unlimited in His power and "stirred" unbelievers, even harsh rulers, to accomplish His work. God can work in all circumstances, even the darkest ones, to bring about His good plans. **God's plans and human history aren't separate from one another but work in tandem for His glory and for the good of humanity: knowing God and making Him known.**



READ JEREMIAH 27:21-22. HOW DID GOD FULFILL HIS WORD? WHAT DOES THIS HELP YOU REALIZE ABOUT HIM?

Imagine how impossible the idea must have seemed: An exiled nation previously plundered by Babylon was going to return to Jerusalem and rebuild. But with what? In a moment when many of them must have wondered how, God had already paved the way. He provided everything they needed to return and rebuild—after seventy years! He restored to them the valuables Nebuchadnezzar had stolen (v. 7), the same items Belshazzar had defiled (Dan. 5). **God hadn't forgotten His promise even when everything seemed lost.** He had a good plan of restoration—for them and for us!

READ JEREMIAH 29:10-14. WHY DO YOU THINK GOD CHOSE TO *STIR CYRUS'S HEART* TO FULFILL THIS PROMISE INSTEAD OF RELEASING HIS PEOPLE BY SOME OTHER WAY?

Jeremiah wrote these words in a letter to some of the earliest exiles in Babylon, before Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed. God could've used other methods to release the Israelites. He could've sent plagues or worked through supernatural events like He did in the exodus from Egypt. **But God chose to stir, or rouse, a heart instead. Why? Because He fulfilled prophecy spoken through Jeremiah (Ezra 1:1).** Both Jeremiah and Isaiah prophesied that God would send His people into exile in Babylon for seventy years and that He would stir a king (Cyrus) to free them and help them rebuild. Isaiah specifically named Cyrus (45:1,13); keep in mind that Isaiah prophesied nearly 150 years before these events took place! God fulfilled His promise, using pagan kings both to judge Israel and to free them. God kept the promise He made in Jeremiah 29:11, a verse people often misinterpret as a universal promise. While it sheds light on God's character—He is faithful to keep promises—the words were for the exiles. **However, because God kept His promise to restore Israel, a Savior then came through Israel. And through Jesus, all believers can enjoy the same security of God's promises to restore us and bring us together for eternity.**

GOD RESTORES BROKENNESS

READ EZRA 3:1-6,10-13



WHAT DID THE PEOPLE REBUILD FIRST? WHAT DO YOU THINK THIS SYMBOLIZED FOR THEM? FOR US?

The people started with the altar—not the temple’s foundation or protective walls. Altars provided a place for the people to atone for their sins through animal sacrifice. In Babylon, the exiles had no temple or designated altar. **Rather than first working on the external and making a grand statement to the outside world with an elaborate temple, the people focused internally—repentance through sacrifice. The best way forward was to look inward, to deal with sin.** Restoring the altar symbolized the people’s desire to be in right relationship to God. **Repentance is our way forward too—the foundation for a right relationship with God. If we skip this step, our foundation will crumble.**



WHY DO YOU THINK THE OLDER GENERATION WEPT OVER THE TEMPLE FOUNDATION WHILE OTHERS REJOICED?

God was actively restoring His people, but they still felt the ache of disobedience; past sin still affected their return. The foundation of the new temple was smaller than Solomon’s temple, and though the people returned home, they worked among ruins. They returned as a remnant, not as a mighty nation. Many of them remembered what was and compared it to their present situation; their loss was great. **They would never be what they were, but what they were brought them to their ruin.** The disappointment they felt pointed to the reality that many prophecies about Israel’s glorious future weren’t going to take place then; in fact, many of them won’t take place until Christ returns. Others may have wept with gratitude at God’s faithfulness and for the opportunity to rebuild at all. **Maybe their realizations are for us too: (1) Nothing earthly will ever satisfy because our better home is still to come; (2) we’re blessed to help build God’s kingdom while we wait.**



WHAT CAN WE LEARN ABOUT COMMUNITY AND WORSHIP THROUGH THE PEOPLE’S ACTIONS?

Imagine returning to a home you really never knew. After seventy years, many exiles died in Babylon. The returnees were likely young when they left; Babylon had been home. Even their identity must’ve been confusing. Regardless, God’s people needed to work together to rebuild. They feared surrounding nations (v. 3), but their response was to worship together as one. **The truth is that we need godly community today; especially in times of fear, we need to come together to worship as one family. Doing so helps us remember who we are—God’s people living here only for a little while.**

WRAP-UP



THE PEOPLE DIDN’T JUST RETURN “HOME”; THEY RETURNED TO GOD. HOW CAN WE TAKE STEPS TO RETURN WHEN WE EXPERIENCE DISTANCE WITH GOD BECAUSE OF OUR SIN?

The truth is that God’s people experienced exile in Babylon because of their sin and idolatry. They ignored God’s warnings for so long that they needed extreme consequences to wake up spiritually. Their return was a new exodus—much like the exodus from Egypt. God freed His people. They may have asked these questions: How do we return when we’ve been gone so long? What if we’ve lost the way? What if we’ve forgotten *how* to be God’s people in the land He gave us? We might ask these questions too. **When we fall into sin, we may wonder if we can ever return to the Lord. We may not even remember what it felt like to live for Him. We may feel the way back is too far. But like Israel, we can take steps to move toward “home”—toward the Lord.** We begin with addressing our sin; we confess it and repent; we lay it down on the altar. We commit to worship the Lord only. We read His Word and live by it. We draw near to Him, and in return, He draws near to us (James 4:8); we find home.

REBUILDING THE TEMPLE

MAIN POINT.

God works for our good and for His glory.



CHRIST CONNECTION

God's people rebuilt the temple so they would have a place to worship God. Years later, God sent His Son, Jesus, to be with His people. Jesus provided something better than the temple; He gave us Himself.



REBUILDING FROM THE RUINS

This week, we're covering the passages and main points below. But we encourage you to read all of the content on the timeline as you prepare to teach.

Ezra 4–6; Haggai 1–2

GOD WORKS THROUGH US FOR HIS NAME

EZRA 6:6-12

6 Now therefore, Tattenai, governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and your associates the governors who are in the province Beyond the River, keep away. 7 Let the work on this house of God alone. Let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its site. 8 Moreover, I make a decree regarding what you shall do for these elders of the Jews for the rebuilding of this house of God. The cost is to be paid to these men in full and without delay from the royal revenue, the tribute of the province from Beyond the River. 9 And whatever is needed—bulls, rams, or sheep for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, or oil, as the priests at Jerusalem require—let that be given to them day by day without fail, 10 that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray for the life of the king and his sons. 11 Also I make a decree that if anyone alters this edict, a beam shall be pulled out of his house, and he shall be impaled on it, and his house shall be made a dunghill. 12 May the God who has caused his name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who shall put out a hand to alter this, or to destroy this house of God that is in Jerusalem. I Darius make a decree; let it be done with all diligence.

WORSHIP REQUIRES PREPARATION

EZRA 6:16-22

16 And the people of Israel, the priests and the Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy. 17 They offered at the dedication of this house of God 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel 12 male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel. 18 And they set the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their divisions, for the service of God at Jerusalem, as it is written in the Book of Moses. 19 On the fourteenth day of the first month, the returned exiles kept the Passover. 20 For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together; all of them were clean. So they slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the returned exiles, for their fellow priests, and for themselves. 21 It was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile, and also by every one who had joined them and separated himself from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land to worship the LORD, the God of Israel. 22 And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the LORD had made them joyful and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

BEFORE YOU TEACH

MAIN POINT.

God works for our good and for His glory.

Leaders: Remember that even opposition has purpose. God can work struggles for your good and for your students' good (Gen. 50:19-20).

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

GOD WORKS THROUGH US FOR HIS NAME

EZRA 6:6-12

"History reveals that the Persian rulers were quite favorable toward the foreign religions and cults represented within their empire. Among the reasons included the possible prayers on behalf of the kings to the various gods. Thus, the rulers took seriously their subjects' religious practices."⁵

EZRA 6:6-12

"Instead of opposing anything the Jews were doing, Darius seemed to fully support and encourage the people. This does not mean he was a convert or believer in the God in Jerusalem. This was partly good politics and partly a rather inclusive perspective on other religions."⁶

WORSHIP REQUIRES PREPARATION

EZRA 6:16-22

"When Judah and Israel disintegrated politically and the Jews were scattered, religious observances and attitudes changed. Stripped of national leadership and cut off from the temple, religious practice lost its cohesion. When the exiles returned to Jerusalem, the Jews, lacking political institutions, turned again to the temple and its hierarchy and to ceremonial standards as their sources for communal identity. During this time temple worship, ceremonial cleanness, and ecclesiastical governance grew in importance. Without a king or kingdom, Israel emerged as a predominantly religious community."⁷



CONTEXT

After the exiles returned from Babylon in 538 BC, they had rebuilt the altar and laid the temple foundation by 536 BC, but they delayed finishing the temple for roughly sixteen years! Why did they pause on the temple, which was so important to their faith—to their identity? Opposition. Surrounding nations wrote manipulative letters to Persia’s king framing the Jews as a rebellious threat; in return, he halted the build. Around 520 BC, prophets like Haggai called Judah’s governor, Zerubbabel, and the people to action, condemning them for investing in their own homes while God’s house remained unfinished (Hag. 1). Though born in Babylon, Zerubbabel was David’s descendant. God promised to always seat someone from David’s family line on Israel’s throne (2 Sam. 7:16). The kingdom felt lost and unstable during the exile, but God explained through Haggai that Zerubbabel was like a signet ring, meaning God chose him to carry David’s line forward. While the period of Israel’s kings came to an end, this metaphorical ring symbolized God’s promise and restored hope in a coming Messiah. Zerubbabel, a remnant of David’s line, obediently pushed forward to finish the temple, the very one the Messiah would one day visit.

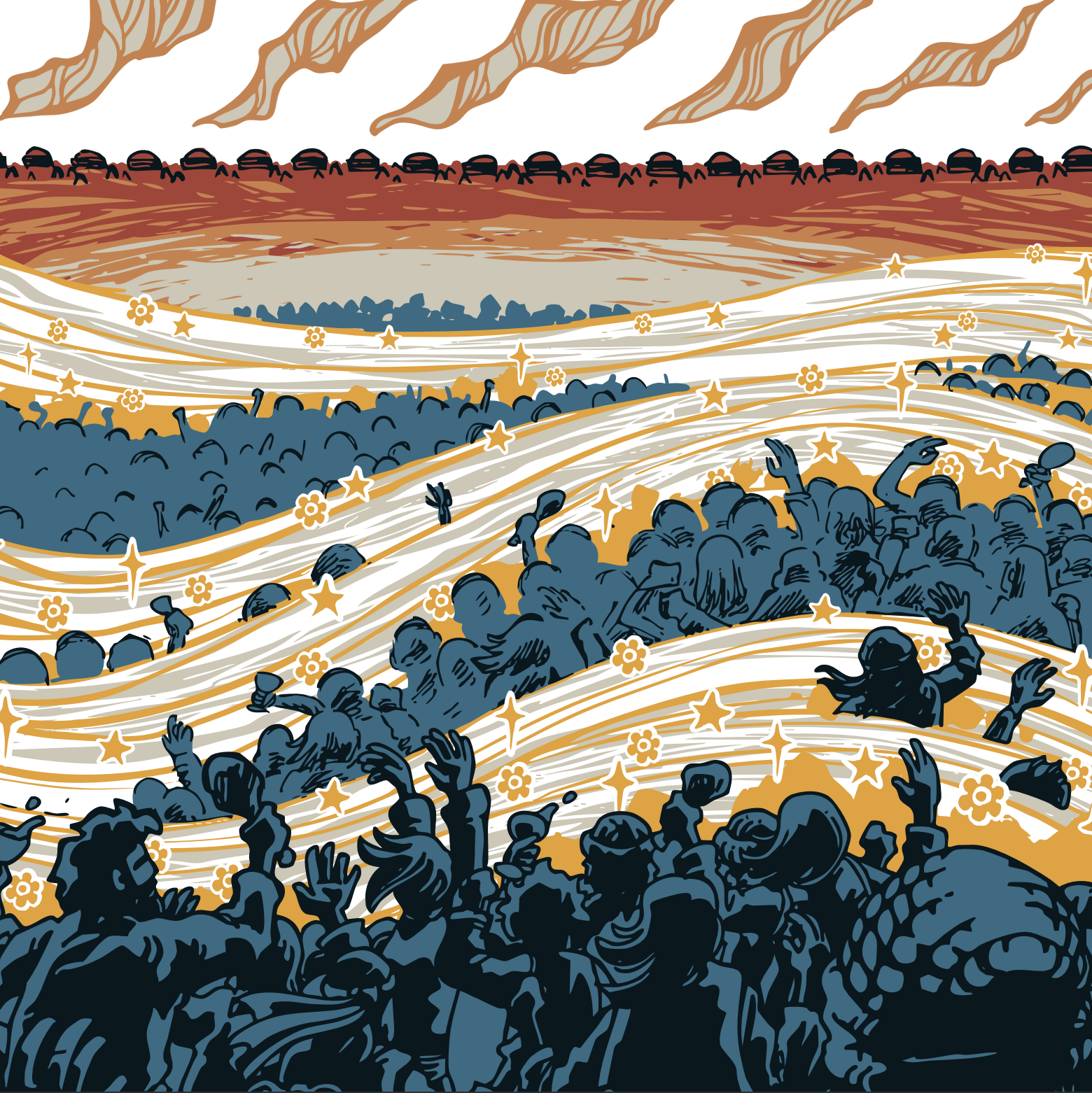
THEOLOGY CONNECTION

God Is Faithful

God’s faithfulness means He keeps His word and always fulfills His promises (1 Cor. 1:9; 2 Tim. 2:13; 1 Pet. 4:19). God’s faithfulness is demonstrated in His fulfillment of the promises He made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The apostle Paul linked the attribute of “faithful” to God’s coming through on His word in 1 Thessalonians 5:24. We reflect God by keeping the promises we make to Him and to others.

LEADERS' PRAYER

GOD, SOMETIMES WE DELAY OBEDIENCE AND CHOOSE OUR COMFORT. WE CONFESS THAT WE USE OPPOSITION AS AN EXCUSE. HELP US TO ENDURE INSTEAD. HELP US TO LIVE IN A WAY THAT POINTS TO YOUR GREAT NAME. USE OUR STRUGGLES TO STRENGTHEN OUR FAITH.



KICK STARTER

♥ HEART CHECK

Last week, we studied about the exiles returning home, and more importantly, returning to God. If you've wandered from God, what steps did you take last week to return? What efforts did you make to connect with God and His people?

These optional activities are designed to help your students interact. You'll find a Discussion Activity and a Cultural Connection, which touches on a relevant topic in today's teen culture. Each group is different, so adapt these activities to fit your group's needs. The goal is for students to connect more to the lesson as they connect to the topic and to one another.

1

MONUMENTAL MOMENTS

SUPPLIES LIST: NONE

Ask the following questions, allowing time for students to share responses:

- **CAN YOU THINK OF A TIME IN YOUR LIFE WHEN EVERYTHING WAS RIDING ON A SINGLE MOMENT (EX. THE LAST MINUTES OF A BIG GAME, A TEST THAT DETERMINED IF YOU PASSED FOR THE YEAR, A MEDICAL RESULT)?**
- **HOW DOES IT FEEL WHEN THESE MOMENTS GO WELL? WHEN THEY DON'T?**
- **HOW HAS A SINGLE MOMENT ALTERED YOUR LIFE OR SOMEONE ELSE'S LIFE?**

A single moment can alter everything and change our lives in an instant. Sometimes, these moments set us on certain paths or establish patterns in our lives. Today, we'll learn about a critical moment in Israel's history that laid a path for future generations.

2

CULTURAL CONNECTION

Do you ever feel like you're in a rebuilding phase? Maybe parts of your life feel like ruins and rubble—a relationship with a parent or a friend, your reputation, your grades. What once stood strong fell apart. Maybe your relationship with God needs rebuilding. Your relationship was once like a strong building, but over time, the building began to sway; then, it cracked and fell. Maybe you're at the beginning of your walk with God, trying to figure out how to start building. Whether you're a new believer or not, you'll likely experience a time when you need to rebuild. The history of God's people is full of rebuilding periods. In those periods, we see that successfully rebuilding began with repentance and worship. Every time. In the end, the physical structures they rebuilt, like the temple or the city, mattered greatly, but what mattered more was the people returning to the Lord in their hearts. Rebuilding begins internally. If you begin anywhere else—with works, with checklists, with outward appearances—then you'll likely crumble again. Build on the foundation of repentance and worship; allow internal work to produce change.

DISCUSSION

MAIN POINT.

God works for our good and for His glory.

GOD WORKS THROUGH US FOR HIS NAME

READ EZRA 6:6-12



WHERE DO YOU SEE GOD'S WORK IN KING DARIUS'S RESPONSE?

Leaders: Share Context. God's people faced opposition in rebuilding the temple and stopped building for sixteen years (Ezra 4). Pushed by the prophet Haggai to start building again, Zerubbabel obeyed, again leading people to write King Darius. But this king's reply was different from the one before and was based on Cyrus's original decree: He funded the building of the temple and supplied all of the materials and necessary animals for God's people to make sacrifices! **What the opponents tried to accomplish in again stopping construction on the temple only helped finance it. This wasn't a king's compassion; it was God's faithfulness at work!**



IF YOU CAME BACK TO REBUILD, WHAT KIND OF HELP WOULD YOU ASK FOR? HOW DID A PERSIAN KING KNOW WHAT THE JEWS NEEDED TO WORSHIP GOD?

Many of us would request what we needed to build our own kingdom again—our homes, our comforts—not what we needed to worship. **Scholars believe a Jewish scribe likely helped shape Darius's reply, which provided for what the people needed most—to worship and be in right relationship with God.** Foreign rulers typically called Him the “God of Israel;” Darius called Him the “God of the heavens,” a phrase he likely learned from a Jew. **God used faithful Jews to inform Darius and to request what His people needed to restore worship and relationship.**



WHY DID GOD BRING HIS PEOPLE HOME? THINK DEEPLY HERE. WHAT IS THE GREATEST REASON TO BRING THEM HOME?

At first glance, we might say that the greatest reason God brought His people home was for their benefit or because of His kindness. We might believe that the reason God's people returned to Israel was all about them. Sure, God is absolutely kind; He is compassionate; He cared about the people's suffering. But verse 12 gives us a glimpse into a much bigger plan in motion: **The return, the rebuilding, the provision—none were only about the people or the nation but for God's name. The return was a way to make Him known to the world—through this people and this land and through His faithfulness to His promises.** God chose to have His name—His glory, His reputation—dwell there. He chose to live among this people in a very real way. But even beyond this, we must ask why. **At the center of all of these historical events was God's plan to send Jesus. He would come from this returning remnant. He would fulfill God's promise to send a Savior. He would bring glory to the Father in a greater way than the temple by being a living temple.** The return and the rebuild were part of the road God was paving to save us from our sin.

WORSHIP REQUIRES PREPARATION

READ EZRA 6:16-22

WHAT HAPPENS TO OUR TRADITIONS OVER TIME? WHY DID THE PEOPLE NEED TO GET THIS PASSOVER RIGHT?

Leaders: Consider reviewing what Passover is and why it began. Israel had endured a split into separate kingdoms and a long exile as consequences for sinful idolatry. Now, the remnant had the opportunity to start over and realign with God. **They had the chance to return spiritually, not just physically. And the spiritual return was much more important.** Their faithfulness and obedience here mattered so much more than they may have realized: It fulfilled prophecy and set an example for future generations. They celebrated and remembered God freeing their ancestors from slavery in Egypt, but they also established expectations. Israel would survive and flourish only by following God, so returning to God's commands was critical. **Building the temple was significant, but even more critical was the people surrendering their hearts in repentance and worship. Without doing so, they would suffer a similar fate as their ancestors, who continually wandered away from God, trusting in false gods and earthly kings.**

HOW DO YOU THINK THE PEOPLE FELT TAKING PART IN PASSOVER FOR THE FIRST TIME?

God's people hadn't forgotten Passover, but they couldn't take part in it in Babylon. They had heard, but now, they saw. **We can imagine their joy as they worshiped God in this way for the first time, in the way He commanded.** The people took part in something sacred. They remembered how God delivered their ancestors from Egypt, and in doing so, they identified with them; He had delivered them too. The people diligently prepared for this moment, anticipating it and making every effort to get it right, as God prescribed in Exodus 12.



HOW CAN WE PREPARE TO WORSHIP GOD? WHAT DIFFERENCE COULD THIS MAKE FOR US?

While believers enjoy God's constant presence through the Holy Spirit, we enter His presence in a unique way when we worship, or exalt His name. We often take for granted and treat as ordinary our ability to enter God's presence, which is possible only because of Jesus's perfect sacrifice. **God is worthy of our preparation. We must still prepare to enter our King's holy presence by confessing our sin, by asking God to be near, by expressing gratitude for Jesus.** Daily preparing to worship God helps us to anticipate His presence.

session 2 | Rebuilding the Temple

WRAP-UP



WHY DID THE PEOPLE'S OBEDIENCE TO GOD'S COMMANDS MATTER GREATLY IN THIS PASSAGE? WHY DOES OURS MATTER TOO?

In this passage, most of the people taking part in the Passover had likely never done so before. They had never seen it. This moment established a pattern for everyone watching. They had the choice of handling it casually, without following God's instructions (Ex. 12), or obediently. What these leaders set in motion would continue for generations to come. **How we live now sets a pattern too. When we approach God's presence casually, when we treat worship lightly, when we obey partially, when we view church and serving God selfishly, we're helping those around us form a pattern too. Simply put: How we live out God's commands affects how others live out His commands.** We often choose an isolated approach when it comes to sin and our relationship with the Lord; we don't consider the effects our faithful obedience and our unfaithful disobedience have on others. But how we live matters greatly, both now and for years to come. If people consider our faith, would they live faithfully or not (Heb. 13:7)?

YOUR KING IS COMING

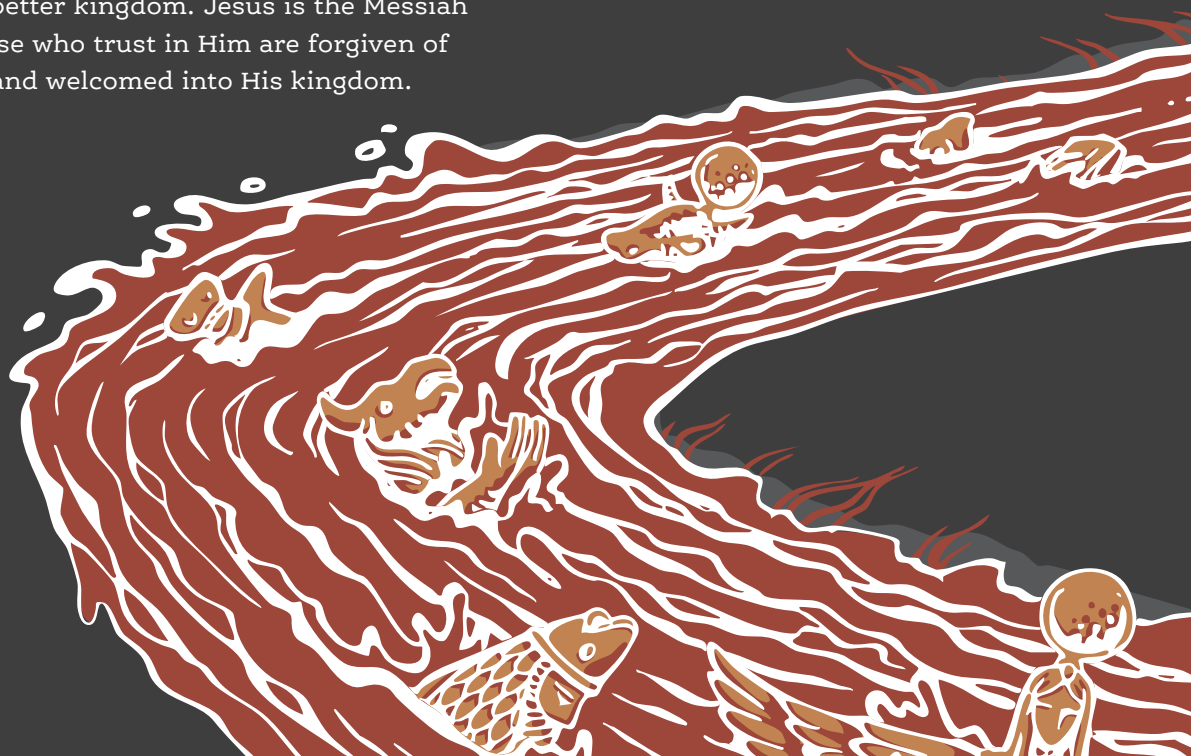
MAIN POINT.

God calls us to live like His promises are real.



CHRIST CONNECTION

Zechariah prophesied about the Messiah, saying He would be a humble King who would build a new and better kingdom. Jesus is the Messiah King. Those who trust in Him are forgiven of their sin and welcomed into His kingdom.



RESTORED AND REFINED

This week, we're covering the passages and main points below. But we encourage you to read all of the content on the timeline as you prepare to teach.

Zechariah

OUR KING IS COMING

ZECHARIAH 9:9-12

9 Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. 10 I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall speak peace to the nations; his rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. 11 As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. 12 Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double.

OUR KING WILL RESTORE US

ZECHARIAH 13:1-2,9

1 "On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness. 2 And on that day, declares the LORD of hosts, I will cut off the names of the idols from the land, so that they shall be remembered no more. And also I will remove from the land the prophets and the spirit of uncleanness. . . . 9 And I will put this third into the fire, and refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call upon my name, and I will answer them. I will say, 'They are my people'; and they will say, 'The LORD is my God.'"

BEFORE YOU TEACH

MAIN POINT.

God calls us to live like His promises are real.

Leaders: Reflect on these lyrics by William Cowper. “There is a fountain filled with blood / drawn from Immanuel’s veins; / And sinners, plunged beneath that flood / Lose all their guilty stains.”⁸

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

OUR KING IS COMING

ZECHARIAH 9:9

“The NIV translates the Hebrew word *lāk* as ‘to you.’ While the NIV rendering is accurate, the word can also mean ‘for your benefit.’ The Hebrew idiom allows one to accept both options. Zechariah declared that the Messiah would soon emerge in the midst of Judah, ‘to you.’ More than mere appearance, this messianic King would come for the express purpose of saving his people. In his first advent, Jesus Christ fulfilled both nuances of *lāk*, coming to the people and for their personal benefit.”⁹

ZECHARIAH 9:9

“In the ancient Near East a king coming in peace would ride a donkey rather than a warhorse. In contrast to the pride and destruction of Alexander the Great, Israel’s King comes in humility and gentleness, bringing salvation and peace. Zechariah 9:9 is one of the most significant messianic passages in Scripture. The gospel writers quote this verse, applying it to Jesus’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem on the Sunday before His crucifixion and resurrection (Matt. 21:5; John 12:15).”¹⁰

ZECHARIAH 9:11

“Verse 11 contains one of the most powerful word pictures of His deliverance. The blood covenant not only pointed back to the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants, both confirmed with sacrifices (Gen. 15:8-21; Ex. 24:8), but also pointed forward to the new covenant mediated by the blood of Jesus (Heb. 12:24). Because of the price paid by His blood, Jesus releases prisoners from the ‘waterless cistern,’ an empty pit used as a dungeon.”¹¹

OUR KING WILL RESTORE US

ZECHARIAH 13:1-2,9

“Whatever power an idol ‘possesses’ has been bestowed on it by a human. This artificial spiritual force allows the ‘idol’ to exert influence over the idol worshipper, as well as on the rest of the society. Further, since the name of beings, places, and things conveys meaning, for an idol, the name carries claims about existence, personality, and deeds. Zechariah described the coming day when all of these vacuous [mindless] projections onto mere objects will be stripped away, exposing the utter foolishness of giving obeisance [homage] to an idol.”¹²

CONTEXT



Background: Zechariah is the longest of the Minor Prophets, written by Zechariah the prophet, whose name in Hebrew means “Yahweh remembers.”¹³ The book includes a mixture of prose narrative, poetry, and visions with apocalyptic features. Leading up to Judah’s destruction, some prophets spread false hope through a prosperity message that “Jerusalem could never fall as long as the Lord’s temple remained in the city,” a doctrine called “the inviolability of Zion.”¹⁴ Faithful prophets spoke boldly against these false claims, but because many people believed the false prophets, God’s people wrestled with a loss of faith and feelings of hopelessness when destruction did come, when Jerusalem fell. Even after returning from Babylon, God’s people faced difficulty and opposition, along with changes in Persian rule. In 520 BC, during Darius I’s rule in Persia and after the exiles had been back in Jerusalem for nearly two decades, Zechariah began to prophesy. He reminded Israel to hope in God during a bleak time when many had lost hope; he called for their obedience in a time when many had forgotten how to obey. Though returning exiles may have felt excited initially, many spiraled into complacency. Prophets like Zechariah and Haggai rallied them to action—to faithful obedience. Zechariah’s message was this: Yahweh remembers; return to the Lord in your heart; commit to obey Him; wait expectantly for God’s kingdom because God is faithful. And Zechariah’s message is for believers today: Repent, obey, and wait with hope.

Cisterns: Man-made holes/caves, usually dug into rock and covered with plaster on the interior. They catch rainwater, acting as water reservoirs.

THEOLOGY CONNECTION



The Scriptures

All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.

LEADERS' PRAYER

GOD, THANK YOU FOR SENDING YOUR SON, WHOSE BLOOD WASHES US CLEAN FROM OUR SIN. HELP US TO LIVE OBEDIENTLY NOW BECAUSE WE KNOW YOUR FUTURE PLANS FOR US ARE GOOD. HELP US TO LIVE FAITHFULLY IN RESPONSE TO YOUR FAITHFULNESS.

These optional activities are designed to help your students interact. You'll find a Discussion Activity and a Cultural Connection, which touches on a relevant topic in today's teen culture. Each group is different, so adapt these activities to fit your group's needs. The goal is for students to connect more to the lesson as they connect to the topic and to one another.

1

HOW TO ENDURE

SUPPLIES LIST: NONE

Ask the following questions, allowing time for students to share responses:

- **WHAT IS THE WORST PHYSICAL PAIN YOU'VE EVER EXPERIENCED?**
- **DOES KNOWING WHEN SOME TYPE OF PAIN (PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL, STRESS, ETC.) WILL END HELP YOU ENDURE IT?**
- **WHY DOES IT HELP YOU PUSH THROUGH?**

Some of us have had to endure physical pain. Somehow, knowing that our pain is limited until a set time can often help us to endure. Life is a lot like this too. We will experience pain and difficulty here, but it has a time limit. It will end, and we will join King Jesus for all eternity.

2

CULTURAL CONNECTION

Think about your relationship with God: When do you grow closer to Him? When do you pull away? Sometimes, we experience spiritual growth during seasons of joy, when life is good; sometimes, we become spiritually lazy and forget to depend on God when life is good. But what about when life hurts? When you walk through painful seasons of heartache, stress, disappointment, sickness, or loss, do you forget what you believe about God—what Scripture teaches about Him? About eternity? If so, you're not alone. Many of us walk through these times as if we have no hope. We hyperfocus on what hurts and on what's difficult, forgetting God's promises rather than clinging to them. But what if we changed all that? What if when we experience the darkest seasons of life, we run to God and walk closely beside Him? What if instead of pulling away, we cling to our assurance of eternity with God—free of pain, sin, and sorrow? What if we lived like God's promises are real? It would change everything.

DISCUSSION

MAIN POINT.

God calls us to live like His promises are real.

OUR KING IS COMING

READ ZECHARIAH 9:9-12



WHAT DO YOU THINK ANCIENT KINGS WERE LIKE? HOW DO THEY COMPARE WITH THE KING IN THIS TEXT?

We might expect certain traits from an ancient king. We might expect him to be strong, fierce in battle, feared by others, and even arrogant. He might be ruthless, wise, and wealthy. Our coming King exhibits some of these traits, but He does so in righteousness. Zechariah says, “your king,” implying that He will identify deeply with His people. The King will be righteous and victorious yet humble. He will eliminate war and bring peace. He will free His people from broken cisterns, which acted as dungeons. He will give instead of take, restoring double what was taken from His people. This is King Jesus!



WHAT CAUSES US TO DOUBT THE BIBLE? READ MATTHEW 21:1-6. HOW DOES THIS PASSAGE HELP US TRUST GOD’S WORD?

Maybe you wrestle with understanding or believing an ancient text about ancient people. God can work through your wrestling and is patient and willing to do so. We often doubt God’s Word because we haven’t put in the work to understand it. We haven’t studied the Word deeply enough to see God’s intentional, beautiful plan of revealing the gospel through human history; we haven’t pieced together how God has already fulfilled prophecies (v. 9); we haven’t studied the evidence, which is plentiful! Take your doubt to God and commit to studying His Word, which is undeniably and beautifully true.



WHY DO YOU THINK GOD WANTED HIS PEOPLE TO HEAR ABOUT A FUTURE KING? WHY IS ZECHARIAH’S PROPHECY HELPFUL FOR US TO HEAR EVEN NOW?

Zechariah prophesied during a time when God’s people felt hopeless. Though they may have been enthusiastic for a while after returning from exile, frequent opposition and the struggle to rebuild left them deflated. Many of them gave into apathy and questioned if God still had good plans for them, if He would keep His promises, if they were lost for good. They struggled spiritually and didn’t live as God’s people in the land He gave them. And during all of this, God spoke through His prophet about a better future—about a King who would rule universally, who would rule righteously and victoriously and humbly. He would free His people from tyranny, like freeing prisoners trapped in empty cisterns. Why—even after God’s people failed Him? Because God made a blood covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15:18)—a promise He made knowing they (we) would fail. We’re not all that different from the postexilic Jews. We may feel like prisoners; we face opposition, fight apathy, and struggle spiritually; we question God’s plans and long for a better world—for heaven. In God’s loving kindness, He gives glimpses in His Word of what’s coming, of who is coming. We lean on hope and live obediently to God’s Word while we wait for our King.

OUR KING WILL RESTORE US

READ ZECHARIAH 13:1-2,9

WHAT IS THIS IMAGE OF A FOUNTAIN (V. 1)? READ JEREMIAH 2:13. HOW CAN WE APPLY BOTH PASSAGES?

Leaders: Consider sharing lyrics to the hymn, “There Is a Fountain.” In Scripture, fountains often represent life and purity. They produced flowing water, a source of life in ancient cultures because it was safe to drink, while non-flowing water became stagnant, deadly to drink. Although God offered His people life through following His commands, they repeatedly chose stagnant water (death). They could atone for their sins through the blood of animals and ritual washing, but it was temporary. **We often choose deadly water too—sin, idols, and worldly comforts. Instead of giving life, they make us sick spiritually, separating us from the Lord—the only source of abundant life.** Zechariah paints a picture of a coming Fountain that will wash away all sin. This Fountain is Jesus, and the water—His precious blood—flows over our sin and makes us clean.

WHAT WOULD IT BE LIKE TO LIVE IN A WORLD WITHOUT DISTRACTIONS LEADING US AWAY FROM GOD?

Can you imagine never wrestling with sinful desires? Can you imagine nothing competing with your love for God? Can you imagine an absence of sin, pain, or death? Can you imagine an absence of guilt and shame over sin? **Imagining this is good because it is the future reality for believers—a perfect home where God has erased idolatry and we’re perfectly restored.** And we have access to this home because of Jesus’s sacrifice.



WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE REFINED? WHY AND HOW DOES GOD REFINE HIS PEOPLE (US)?

Refining is a process of purification. Gold, other metals, and even foods go through a refining process often involving intense heat to get rid of impurities. For example, a piece of gold may contain traces of other metals, which devalues it. To get rid of those cheaper metals, gold is put into intense fire and liquefied. The impurities rise to the surface and are scooped out. **Don’t miss this: Refining requires heat.** God’s people go through a similar process. Our faith, which is more valuable than gold, goes through heat—trials, pain, persecution. And in the process, God makes us more like Him and purifies us (1 Pet. 1:6-8). This process is called sanctification and lasts for our entire lives, until we reach eternity. Only then will we be made perfect. **What a privilege, what a journey, to be made more like Jesus even here—even in the heat, even when it hurts.**

session 3 | Your King Is Coming

WRAP-UP



HOW SHOULD BELIEVING GOD’S PROMISES ABOUT HEAVEN AND JUDGMENT AFFECT OUR CHOICES, MINDSETS, AND PRIORITIES NOW?

Believers *believe*, right? Isn’t that the point? If we believe in God, in His Word, in His Son—that He was crucified for our sin, buried, and resurrected—then we also believe in a coming judgment and a coming kingdom in the new heavens and new earth. **Here’s the truth: What we believe about the future shapes how we live in the present.** How can we believe in the hope of heaven and *not* live with joyful anticipation? How can we believe in a future with God free from sin and pain and *not* live with hope? Even more than this, how can belief *not* shape our decisions, our priorities, and our thinking? **Our lives should reflect that we believe God’s Word. Our choices should be holy; our mindset should be centered on what is true, pure, and lovely (Phil. 4:8); our priorities should revolve around loving God and helping others know Him.** Believing in God’s promises should motivate everything we do; believing in His judgment should cause us to live out and share the gospel with anyone who will listen.

IF IT PLEASES THE KING

MAIN POINT.

Though we can't always see Him moving, we can trust God is with us and working for us.



CHRIST CONNECTION

While the situation seemed hopeless for Esther's people, the Jews, God was totally in control and had a plan to save them. Humanity's situation may have appeared hopeless because of the depth of our sin, but God always had a plan for our salvation: the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus.



BEHIND THE SCENES

This week, we're covering the passages and main points below. But we encourage you to read all of the content on the timeline as you prepare to teach.

Esther

GOD IS WITH US

ESTHER 3:7-10,12-13

7 In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur (that is, they cast lots) before Haman day after day; and they cast it month after month till the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. 8 Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom. Their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not to the king's profit to tolerate them. 9 If it please the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay 10,000 talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business, that they may put it into the king's treasuries." 10 So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews. . . . 12 Then the king's scribes were summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, and an edict, according to all that Haman commanded, was written to the king's satraps and to the governors over all the provinces and to the officials of all the peoples, to every province in its own script and every people in its own language. It was written in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed with the king's signet ring. 13 Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with instruction to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods.

GOD IS WORKING FOR US

ESTHER 8:5-8,11-12,17

5 And she said, "If it please the king, and if I have found favor in his sight, and if the thing seems right before the king, and I am pleasing in his eyes, let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, which he wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the provinces of the king. 6 For how can I bear to see the calamity that is coming to my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?" 7 Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, "Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and they have hanged him on the gallows, because he intended to lay hands on the Jews. 8 But you may write as you please with regard to the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with the king's ring, for an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked." . . . 11 [Letters were sent] saying that the king allowed the Jews who were in every city to gather and defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, children and women included, and to plunder their goods, 12 on one day throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. . . . 17 And in every province and in every city, wherever the king's command and his edict reached, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday. And many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them.

BEFORE YOU TEACH

MAIN POINT.

Though we can't always see Him moving, we can trust God is with us and working for us.

Leaders: Be encouraged that God is always working, even when we can't see Him moving (Ps. 77:19).

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

GOD IS WITH US

ESTHER 3:7

"The Persian diviners, magi, and astrologers cast lots at the beginning of each new year to determine which days of the year would bring good fortune."¹⁶

ESTHER 3:13

"It should jar us how easily a plan to eliminate an entire ethnicity of people was proposed and proclaimed. Lest we think this was just a problem for the ancients, remember the genocides in Darfur, Rwanda, Bosnia, Herzegovina, Cambodia, and Syria. And we dare not leave out the Holocaust! At the heart of each of these tragedies is one ethnic group seeking to exercise its self-perceived and self-proclaimed superiority over another. Satan is at work in all such instances, but in Haman's case there was probably a particularly hellish influence seeking to annihilate the line from which the Messiah would come."¹⁷

GOD IS WORKING FOR US

ESTHER 8:5-8

"Although God's name is never mentioned in the book, the plot of the story demonstrates to a Jewish believer that the unusual coincidences that allowed for Mordecai to report a plot against the king (2:19-23), for Esther to be chosen as queen (2:1-18), for Esther to enter the king's presence without being invited (5:1-8), for the vicious plot of Haman to be revealed (6:1-7:10), and for Mordecai to rise to power (8:1-10:3), all point to God's sovereign control over the details of history. . . . In most of the Old Testament, God boldly speaks, acts, and directs the course of history, but in a time of foreign domination by pagan nations, he works behind the scenes through the lives of both believers and unbelievers. In many eras of history, God's face is not seen, his hand is not performing great miracles, and his voice is not heard audibly; yet, he is present."¹⁸

ESTHER 8:11

"Apart from believing that God actively and sovereignly rules over our world, the book of Esther becomes a mere celebration of Mordecai's wisdom, Esther's courage, and, most of all, simple chance and luck. . . . This book was written to show that God himself acts to achieve the total defeat of his foes and the safety of his people."¹⁹



CONTEXT

Background: Esther's author is unknown, but Jewish tradition often credits Mordecai. Jews retell the narrative every year during Purim, a feast established because of the events in Esther. The book reveals much about God's providence and nature without ever mentioning His name! Initially written for Jews who stayed in Persia after the exile ended, the book tells the decade-long story of Esther, an orphan, and her cousin and guardian Mordecai, both Jews who stayed in Persia's capital city of Susa. Through God's providence, Esther gained the favor of Persia's king, Ahasuerus (Xerxes in Greek), who chose her as queen, though he didn't know she was Jewish. Persia's prime minister, Haman, despised the Jews; when Mordecai refused to bow before him, Haman crafted a plan to annihilate all Jews in Persia's empire, which included Jerusalem. Interestingly, Haman was King Agag's descendant, an Amalekite whom Saul spared, though God ordered him to destroy the entire tribe (1 Sam. 15:1-9). In Esther, we see the effects of Saul's disobedience roughly five hundred years later! But we also see that even in Persia, God wasn't absent from His people and had positioned Esther for "such a time as this" (Esth. 4:14).

THEOLOGY CONNECTION



God's Plan and Human Action

God's sovereignty over all of life encompasses the free actions of human beings. Proverbs 19:21 says, "Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand." In ways we are unable to comprehend fully, the Lord's plan goes forward through the choices of human beings. 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 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.

LEADERS' PRAYER

GOD, THOUGH WE SOMETIMES FEEL LIKE YOU'RE NOT WORKING, ESTHER'S STORY REMINDS US THAT YOU ARE ALWAYS WORKING—THROUGH HUMAN HISTORY AND THROUGH FLAWED PEOPLE. WHEN WE CAN'T SENSE YOUR MOVEMENT, HELP US TO TAKE ENCOURAGEMENT FROM THIS TRUTH. HELP US TO LIVE BOLDLY BECAUSE WE TRUST IN YOUR PLANS.



KICK STARTER

RATE IT!

How much is Satan to blame for bad circumstances (1=Not from him; 10=Satan is totally to blame)?



These optional activities are designed to help your students interact. You'll find a Discussion Activity and a Cultural Connection, which touches on a relevant topic in today's teen culture. Each group is different, so adapt these activities to fit your group's needs. The goal is for students to connect more to the lesson as they connect to the topic and to one another.

1

TAKING RISKS

SUPPLIES LIST: NONE

Ask the following questions, allowing time for students to share responses:

- **DO YOU ENJOY TAKING RISKS OR DO YOU AVOID THEM AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE?**
- **WHY ARE SOME PEOPLE DRAWN TO RISKY SITUATIONS?**
- **DO YOU THINK LIFE IS MEANINGFUL WITHOUT TAKING RISKS? EXPLAIN.**

Some of us love taking risks; we thrive on the adrenaline rush. Others of us would rather play life safe and stick to situations that don't threaten us in any way. The truth is that living for God is risky. Today, we'll read about a woman named Esther who risked everything for God's people.

2

CULTURAL CONNECTION

Many of us want to know why life happens the way it does—why bad things happen, why our lives are the way they are, why we suffer. This desire to know isn't new; Adam and Eve wrestled too, and the serpent used the desire against them, baiting them with a promise that eating the fruit would give them knowledge—God's knowledge (Gen. 3:5). But God had commanded them not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Why? Because doing so would lead to death. Here's the truth: In our humanity, we aren't capable of understanding all things. God didn't design us to carry that weight. Instead, He designed us to walk with Him by faith, to trust in His knowledge and understanding (Prov. 3:5-6). So, what do we do when we can't see where God is leading us, when we don't understand? How can we believe God is at work, in control, and moving when we can't see evidence? We walk with Him anyway. We trust in God's vision and knowledge anyway, rather than our own. He'll never lead us to places He won't go with us. And His presence with us is all we need.

DISCUSSION

MAIN POINT.

Though we can't always see Him moving, we can trust God is with us and working for us.

GOD IS WITH US

READ ESTHER 3:7-10,12-13

Leaders: The background for Esther is extensive but important for students to understand. We suggest sharing the Context to help set up the passage and the discussion questions.

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN IN THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME? WHAT ABOUT IN THE WRONG PLACE AT THE WRONG TIME? EXPLAIN.

Being in the right place at the right time is usually a blessing, like being chosen for a prize or randomly meeting someone who would become your best friend.

Sometimes, being in the right place at the right time is being able to help someone else. Or maybe you've been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Maybe you were involved in a wreck due to someone else's reckless driving, or maybe you were blamed for something you didn't do simply because you were nearby. **Either way, we can trust God's guidance in these situations.**

WHY IS THIS CONFLICT BIGGER THAN JUST HAMAN VERSUS THE JEWS? WHO DID THE CONFLICT AFFECT?

Leaders: Review Haman's lineage. This conflict was bigger than Haman and the Jews. God promised to send a Savior to heal the world of sin through Abraham's descendants, the Jews. This conflict was one that mattered for the whole world, for us, because it was Satan's attempt at interfering with God's redemption plan. We sometimes forget that a spiritual realm exists—that Satan and forces of darkness are working against God and His people (Eph. 6:12). **But the battle is already won; it was always won because God always had a plan for our salvation through His Son!** And nothing would stop Him from accomplishing it.

THE KING ANNOUNCED THE JEWS' DESTRUCTION ON THE EVENING BEFORE PASSOVER. WHY WAS THIS SIGNIFICANT? HOW DO YOU THINK THE JEWS FELT?

Leaders: It may be helpful to quickly review Passover's origin in Exodus 12. The edict applied to Jews in the entire Persian empire, including Jerusalem. Their ancestors survived slavery in Egypt, freed by God's mighty hand; they survived wandering in the wilderness; they survived battles to acquire the promised land; then, a remnant survived exile in Babylon! Would God really allow the Jews to be annihilated? **And of all times for the edict's announcement, it fell on the evening before Passover, when the Jews celebrate deliverance from Egypt! Would God not deliver them now?** They may have wondered if God was absent, no longer honoring His covenant with Abraham: What happened to God making His people into a great nation, blessing them and all people through them? What happened to blessing those who bless His people and cursing those who curse them (Gen. 12:2-3)? **From a human perspective, evil seemed victorious. But God was using evil human action to accomplish His plan—a miraculous plan despite the awful circumstances. God's people couldn't see Him working, but He was there—behind the scenes, in every detail.**

GOD IS WORKING FOR US

READ ESTHER 8:5-8,11-12,17



AS A JEW, ESTHER WAS IN THE MINORITY IN PERSIA. WHEN HAVE YOU FELT THIS WAY AS A BELIEVER IN OUR CULTURE?

Esther lived in a pagan world—no temple, no public reading of God’s Word—surrounded by an unbelieving Persian culture. But God was working there even though His people couldn’t see it. **Your life is part of a bigger purpose than you can see. God is weaving a story of redemption, which means God has you exactly where you are—in this moment in history, surrounded by this culture—for good reason.** As a believer, you may sometimes feel like a minority; in many ways, you are. **God calls you to think, act, and speak differently than the world—to reflect His kingdom.** When your life is rooted in Scripture, you’ll face tension from a culture that disregards God’s commands. Live them out anyway. Wherever you are, commit to living as God’s ambassador.



DO YOU THINK GOD USES ALL THE PARTS OF OUR STORY? HOW CAN THIS HELP YOU TO HONOR HIM IN ALL SEASONS?

Leaders: Be sensitive to situations of abuse, neglect, suicidal thoughts, and so on. We **never** teach students to find the “good” in these situations instead of seeking help. Maybe you don’t love everything about your life and wish to be in another time or another place. Believing that God has a purpose for you can help you live more intentionally—to know you aren’t here by coincidence. **If you frame your life around God’s goodness and providence (that He is involved in His creation by preserving, governing, and caring for it), then wherever you are in life is a place to love Him, serve Him, and share Him with others.** You may wish for different circumstances, but you can trust God’s intentionality with the details of your life. His purpose is good: to make you like Jesus (Rom. 8:28). So, if you wish your life was different, intentionally look for God’s work. Ask Him to show you how to make the most of where you are for His kingdom.



THE NEW EDICT GAVE THE JEWS A CHANCE OF VICTORY. HOW DO WE HAVE MORE THAN A CHANCE OF VICTORY IN JESUS?

Jesus already won the victory. We have more than a chance; we have certain victory against our greatest enemy—death. While we live on earth, we still fight sin and darkness. **But we don’t live defeated lives here, expecting to enjoy victory in eternity only. God gave us victory over sin now if we walk with Him!** God didn’t just give us a chance; He reversed the curse of sin through Jesus’s sacrifice for those who believe!

WRAP-UP



WHAT WOULD CHANGE IF YOU TRUSTED GOD WAS WORKING IN THE GOOD AND BAD SITUATIONS OF YOUR LIFE?

Leaders: Be sensitive to situations of abuse, neglect, suicidal thoughts, and so on. We sometimes think that God works only in the good circumstances of our lives and credit Satan for the bad circumstances. But this way of thinking isn’t biblical. Now, make no mistake: Satan and forces of darkness do work against God’s people (Eph. 6:12). Pain is a result of sin, which Satan helped propel in Eden, but not all unpleasant circumstances are from the evil one. Some are outcomes of our sin. Some are trials allowed by God to strengthen our faith or opportunities to live out our faith in a lost world (James 1:2-4). **Here’s the truth: Both good and bad circumstances are avenues to live boldly for God.** They don’t change *who* He is or *what* He has accomplished. In *The Knowledge of the Holy*, A.W. Tozer said, “He has already lived in all our tomorrows as He has lived in all of our yesterdays.”²⁰ **Usually, we can look back and see God’s hand, and because He was with us in the past, we can trust He is with us now and will be with us “in all our tomorrows.”**

FROM THE MOUNDS OF RUBBLE

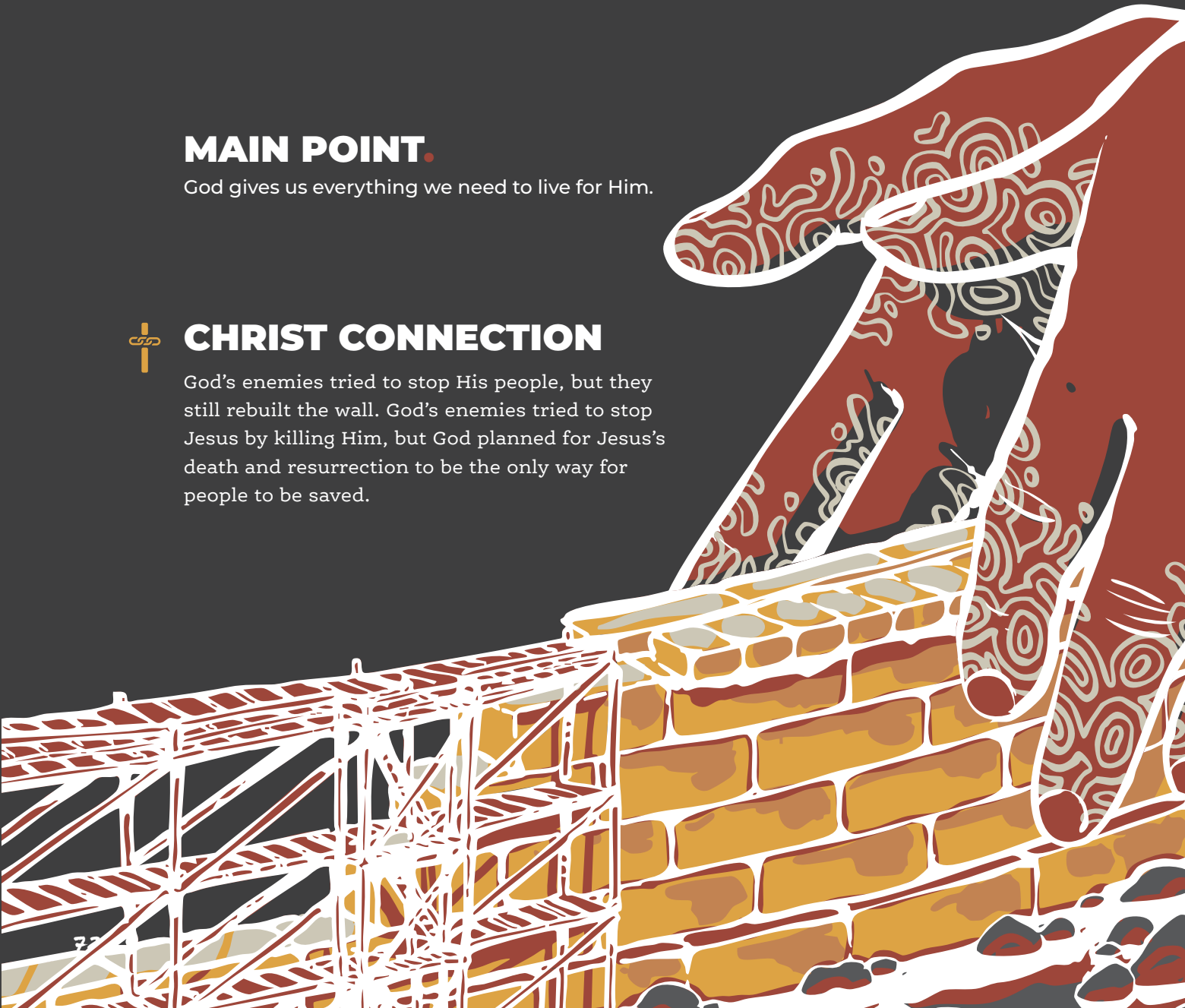
MAIN POINT.

God gives us everything we need to live for Him.



CHRIST CONNECTION

God's enemies tried to stop His people, but they still rebuilt the wall. God's enemies tried to stop Jesus by killing Him, but God planned for Jesus's death and resurrection to be the only way for people to be saved.



POWER TO PERSEVERE

This week, we're covering the passages and main points below. But we encourage you to read all of the content on the timeline as you prepare to teach.

Nehemiah 1–6

GOD EXCHANGES OUR DISCOURAGEMENT FOR PERSEVERANCE

NEHEMIAH 4:1-14

1 Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. 2 And he said in the presence of his brothers and of the army of Samaria, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?" 3 Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, "Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!" 4 Hear, O our God, for we are despised. Turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives. 5 Do not cover their guilt, and let not their sin be blotted out from your sight, for they have provoked you to anger in the presence of the builders. 6 So we built the wall. And all the wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work. 7 But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry. 8 And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it. 9 And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night. 10 In Judah it was said, "The strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. There is too much rubble. By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall." 11 And our enemies said, "They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work." 12 At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, "You must return to us." 13 So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people by their clans, with their swords, their spears, and their bows. 14 And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, "Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes."

GOD'S POWER DOES THE WORK IN US

NEHEMIAH 6:15-16

15 So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. 16 And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.

BEFORE YOU TEACH

MAIN POINT.

God gives us everything we need to live for Him.

Leaders: When you face discouragement or opposition as a leader, imitate Nehemiah—pray to God for help and continue the good work He has given you to do, knowing it isn't in vain (1 Cor. 15:58).

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

GOD EXCHANGES OUR DISCOURAGEMENT FOR PERSEVERANCE

NEHEMIAH 4:1-3

“The people seem too weak, the task seems too big, and the people recognize that they cannot do this by themselves. They are right, but what those who speak this way fail to remember is that they are not doing this by themselves. God has promised to enable the effort, and the good hand of God is upon Nehemiah.”¹

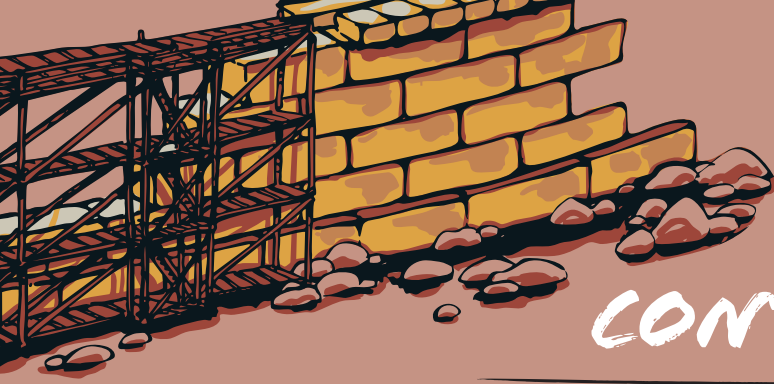
NEHEMIAH 4:1-5

“Sanballat knew that a restored Jerusalem would lessen his influence in the area. Thus he was greatly angered and intent on discouraging Nehemiah's project, even though he knew that it had the approval of the Persian court. Anger will often be the world's response to God's work because it challenges worldviews and values. Much of the opposition to the project consisted of psychological warfare. The first opposition came in the form of ridicule, often sufficient to stifle the spirit and work of anyone. . . . The first thing Nehemiah did was to turn to God in prayer. God's people should always regard prayer not as a last resort but as our primary weapon against opposition. . . . A number of points in response to this issue should be made: (1) Nehemiah's request. . . was for divine judgment against sin, a clear teaching in Scripture. The prayer in verse 5 for God not to cover their enemies' guilt was not a prayer against their salvation but for divine justice. (2) It was a prayer for God to act, not for permission to take personal vengeance (Rom. 12:19-21). (3) It expressed zeal for God's work and God's honor. Nehemiah had no doubts that the building of the wall was God's doing, so opposition to it was opposition to God.”²

GOD'S POWER DOES THE WORK IN US

NEHEMIAH 6:16

“The sense in which the surrounding people were afraid would be that they were awed, rather than apprehensive. Their respect for the Jews and their God was increased, and their self-esteem diminished. So the very size of the circle which Sanballat had managed to draw round Jerusalem brought all the wider recognition of God's power. Paul's experience of the fruits of persecution in Philippians 1:12.”³



CONTEXT

Background: The author of Nehemiah is anonymous, but Jewish sources usually credit Ezra. Many scholars believe 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah may have been written by a person (or persons), the “Chronicler.” Nehemiah lived in Persia’s winter capital and served as King Artaxerxes’s personal attendant and cupbearer, which gained him special favor. A group of Jewish men, along with Nehemiah’s brother, Hanani, traveled the one thousand miles to Jerusalem and reported that the situation there was despairing. God’s people had been back from exile for about ninety years; though they rebuilt the temple, the city was a pile of rubble with no protective wall. Nehemiah wept for days and prayed a beautiful prayer of confession and petition, a prayer worth reading (Neh. 1:4-11). Nehemiah couldn’t hide his sadness, which according to ancient Persian etiquette, could’ve communicated displeasure with the king and led to his execution. When the king inquired about his demeanor, Nehemiah prayerfully and fearfully responded with the truth and a request to return to Jerusalem; the king agreed, even supplying Nehemiah with letters that granted him safe passage through the region and the necessary supplies to build! Nehemiah recognized God’s hand was on his journey (Neh. 2:8), but rebuilding and strengthening Jerusalem gained the attention and disapproval of other tribes, who worked relentlessly to interrupt the work.

THEOLOGY CONNECTION



God Is Immanent

When we say that God is immanent, we mean that God is personable and relatable to those made in His image, while remaining completely distinct and unique from all of His creation. It means that God is not a distant deity, who only sits on His heavenly throne with no interaction, but instead, He is a personal God who created people in His image to be in personal relationship with Him.

LEADERS' PRAYER

GOD, SOMETIMES WE FEEL LIKE NEHEMIAH AND THE PEOPLE REBUILDING THE WALL. THE TASK OF LEADING AND DISCIPLING OUR STUDENTS SEEMS HUGE, SOMETIMES IMPOSSIBLE. WE BECOME DISCOURAGED BY SETBACKS AND OPPOSITION. HELP US TO LEAN ON YOUR ABILITY AND YOUR POWER INSTEAD OF OUR OWN. DO AMAZING WORK IN THEIR LIVES THAT CAN BE EXPLAINED ONLY AS “ACCOMPLISHED WITH THE HELP OF OUR GOD.”



KICK STARTER

♥ HEART CHECK

Last week, we saw how God positioned Esther to save the Jews, even when it didn't look like He was working. How did you see God moving last week? Did you make an effort to look for His work, even if it was hard to see? What can you do to be more aware of how God wants to use this season of your life?

These optional activities are designed to help your students interact. You'll find a Discussion Activity and a Cultural Connection, which touches on a relevant topic in today's teen culture. Each group is different, so adapt these activities to fit your group's needs. The goal is for students to connect more to the lesson as they connect to the topic and to one another.

1

ATTENTION AND ACCOLADES

SUPPLIES LIST: NONE

Ask the following questions, allowing time for students to share responses:

- **DO YOU WANT OTHERS TO KNOW ABOUT THE GOOD THINGS YOU DO OR DO YOU WANT TO KEEP IT PRIVATE?**
- **HAVE YOU EVER BEEN RECOGNIZED FOR SOMETHING GOOD THAT YOU REALLY DIDN'T EARN? HOW DID YOU HANDLE IT?**
- **HAVE YOU EVER DONE SOMETHING GREAT BUT SOMEONE ELSE GOT CREDIT FOR IT? HOW DID YOU FEEL OR REACT?**

Here's the deal: We need encouragement and affirmation. But we often allow that desire to take over, making the need for attention or praise our motive for doing what's right or good. In reality, anything good in us comes from the only One who is good: God.

2

CULTURAL CONNECTION

Sometimes, life feels like it's crumbling all around us, like a war zone. Circumstances we couldn't control smashed everything to pieces. When we look around, all we see are ruins and rubble where strong towers and bridges once stood. And in these times, we may feel like we'll never be able to rebuild. The destruction feels too deep, too permanent. Maybe life crumbled when you heard the word "cancer" spoken over someone you loved. Maybe your parents divorced. Maybe your sibling or friend died in a car crash. Maybe you tried alcohol or drugs for the first time and can't walk away. Maybe you compromised godly standards for purity. The truth is that life does crumble sometimes. It breaks and crashes down. And the other truth is that even in your best efforts, you can't rebuild what broke—not on your own. But God can. God responds when you turn to Him, when you hand Him the pieces of what's left, when you repent. He rebuilds you and restores you (1 Pet. 5:10). He makes you new.

DISCUSSION

MAIN POINT.

God gives us everything we need to live for Him.

GOD EXCHANGES OUR DISCOURAGEMENT FOR PERSEVERANCE

READ NEHEMIAH 4:1-14



WHEN YOU'RE STRUGGLING, WHO'S THE FIRST PERSON YOU TURN TO? WHY DO WE STRUGGLE TO GO TO GOD FIRST?

When you feel stressed or get bad news, you may instinctively turn to a parent or a friend. You need advice or comfort, so you go to someone you can see and hear. In this passage, Nehemiah immediately turned to God in prayer, likely because he had cultivated a habit of doing so. People who love us can support us and give us godly advice, but only God gives us perfect wisdom to guide our steps. **God is immanent, meaning He isn't distant; He is so very near and desires a relationship with us.** Talk to Him throughout the day, even about "small" things, because He cares about every part of your life.



HOW DOES CULTURE MOCK BELIEVERS? HOW SHOULD WE REACT?

You made a big stand for your faith, and people called you names, made fun of you, deserted you, or accused you of being judgmental. Teammates treated you like an outcast. You were penalized for missing a practice to attend church. Being misunderstood or mocked is discouraging and sometimes hurtful. The Jews had every worldly reason to stop—safety, fatigue, fear—but they looked to God. **Respond by admitting your discouragement and hurt to God; take your doubts and fears to Him instead of retaliating. Then, like the Jews rebuilding, lean in and faithfully do the next thing God has laid before you to do.**



READ NEHEMIAH 1:5. WHAT DID NEHEMIAH BELIEVE ABOUT GOD? HOW DID THOSE BELIEFS HELP HIM PERSEVERE? AS BELIEVERS TODAY, WHY DO WE STRUGGLE TO PERSEVERE?

When Nehemiah heard about the awful situation in Jerusalem, he called out to the "LORD God of heaven" and declared that He was the "great and awesome God who keeps covenant." Nehemiah's prayer shows his beliefs about God: He was capable, worthy of awe and worship, and faithful, despite how the situation looked. God wouldn't break His promise. **Nehemiah's firm beliefs kept him moving, when the situation screamed for him to stop—when many of us would've given up.** The truth is that a lot of us don't know how to persevere; our faith doesn't have the stamina of these men and women, of others who've suffered greatly or given their lives for Christ. **We give up the moment we feel uncomfortable, at the first sign of ridicule or loneliness, or when our popularity is on the line.** Maybe our ideas about God are weak compared to who God is; maybe our beliefs have made Him small, incapable; maybe we doubt that He will keep His promises. And we couldn't be more wrong. We must look back at God's faithfulness and look to God's Word; if we do, and if we believe what we find, we'll choose faithfulness to Jesus and never dream of stopping.

GOD'S POWER DOES THE WORK IN US

READ NEHEMIAH 6:15-16

WHY DO WE WANT RECOGNITION AND PRAISE SO BADLY? HOW DOES OUR CULTURE MAKE THIS TOUGHER?

Most of us crave recognition; sometimes, the chance of getting attention is our only motive for doing good acts. We struggle with others not knowing when we do something great or honorable. Social media has fueled this struggle. If we don't share it, then it didn't happen, right? Others' highlights are visible at all times, to which we compare our own accomplishments; inevitably, theirs look better, more impressive. Nehemiah left a significant position in the king's court—the king of the largest empire at that time—to go rebuild the walls of a small city by comparison. **Nehemiah's name wasn't praised for the work, but God's was.** Hearing that we've done something good is nice, and receiving recognition can encourage us. But what if we followed Nehemiah's lead? **What if our good acts didn't hinge on applause? What if we were willing to walk away from what the world says is more important and instead invest in what seems smaller, insignificant, or even unseen? And what if we gave all the glory to God instead of seeking some for ourselves?**



PEOPLE KNEW GOD ACCOMPLISHED THE REBUILDING OF THE WALL. IS THE WAY YOU LIVE AN UNDENIABLE EXAMPLE OF GOD'S WORK? WHY SHOULD IT BE?

Fifty-two days. Incredible. But not because of Nehemiah or the people. **The work was incredible because God alone made it possible.** Even outsiders and unbelievers saw God's hand at work in the rebuilding and transforming—stone by stone. The same should be true of our lives. **Unbelievers, really everyone, should see such a transformation in us that they know we couldn't have done it on our own—a change explained only by God's hand doing the work to rebuild us. God takes the rubble and ruins of who we were—how we talked, what we thought, how we treated people, how we handled stress, drama, and even grief—and He lovingly, patiently rebuilds us, stone by stone.** He promised to make us a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17); if nothing at all about our lives has changed, then we must examine whether or not we know Jesus. To know Him is to love Him; and to love Him means we follow His commands (John 14:15). And this transforms everything.

WRAP-UP



HOW ARE YOU LETTING FEAR OF BEING LEFT OUT OR REJECTED DISCOURAGE YOU FROM LIVING BOLDLY FOR JESUS? WHAT WOULD HELP YOU PERSEVERE?

When we give our lives to Jesus, most of us don't suddenly stop caring about what others think. Many of us struggle for a long time. You want to know the truth? A lot of us never fully stop caring what others think. We let it hinder us for so long that we look back with regret over all the time we wasted—time we can't get back, time we could've used for the Lord. Here's the honest truth: Right now, your social life may feel like the most important thing in the world. **The people you're working so hard to impress—even compromising your convictions for—will one day move on. The attention you're striving for—even poisoning your heart and mind for—will fade.** What doesn't end or fade is God's kingdom. Instead of waiting, live boldly as a citizen of heaven *now*. Link arms with others who love Jesus. And if you're the only one, look for ways to love others like Jesus loves them. Look for people who are hurting or who need a friend. Persevering happens one small decision at a time. So, live boldly today, and then do it again tomorrow.

ALL WHO COULD LISTEN

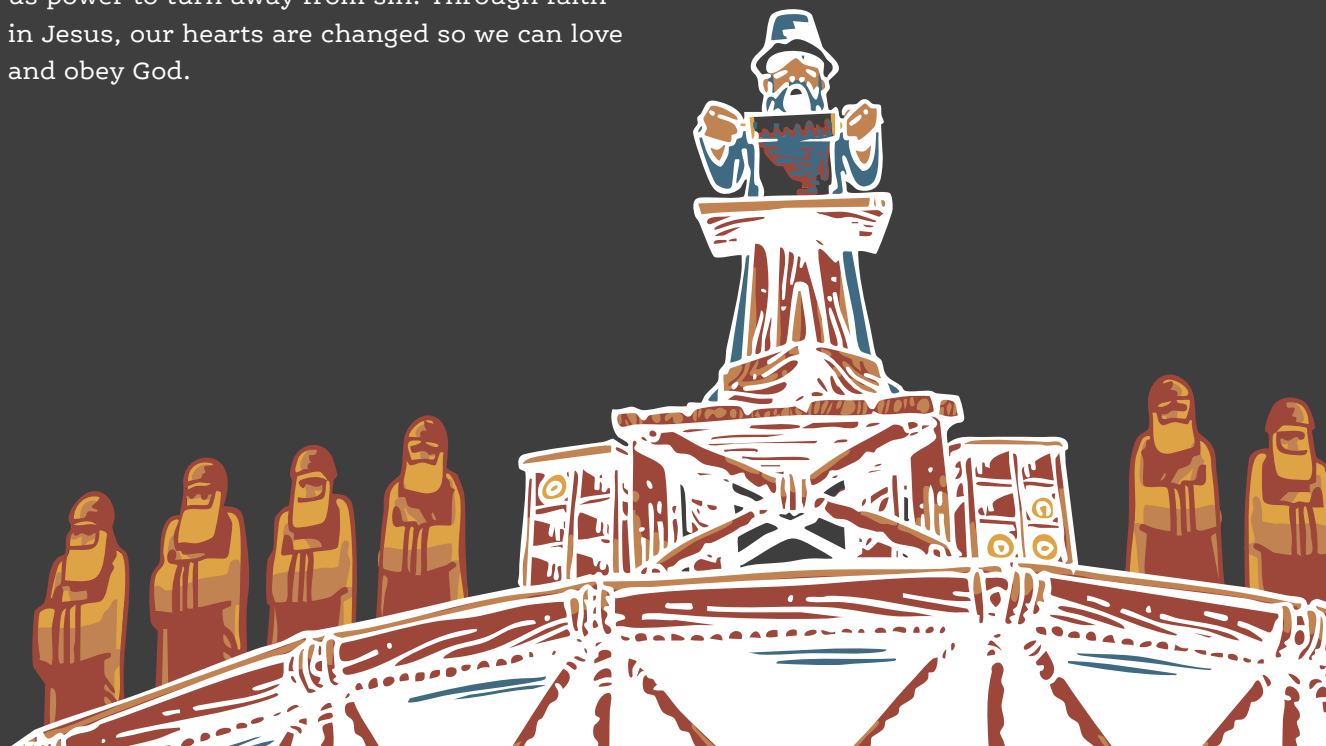
MAIN POINT.

Our lives reveal our greatest treasure.



CHRIST CONNECTION

Ezra taught God's law, and the people recognized their sin. Jesus came to die for our sin and give us power to turn away from sin. Through faith in Jesus, our hearts are changed so we can love and obey God.



TRANSFORMED BY THE WORD

This week, we're covering the passages and main points below. But we encourage you to read all of the content on the timeline as you prepare to teach.

Nehemiah 8

GOD'S LAW BRINGS GRIEF

NEHEMIAH 8:1-9

1 And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel. 2 So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. 3 And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. 4 And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. 5 And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. 6 And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. 7 Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodia, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. 8 They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. 9 And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law.

GOD'S LAW BRINGS JOY

NEHEMIAH 8:10-12

10 Then he said to them, "Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." 11 So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved." 12 And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

BEFORE YOU TEACH

MAIN POINT.

Our lives reveal our greatest treasure.

Leaders: This week, contemplate the miracle of God's Word in your hands; ask Him to reveal new truths and to transform your heart (Ps. 119:18).

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

GOD'S LAW BRINGS GRIEF

NEHEMIAH 8:1

"It is significant that this reading of the law and the worship service were not centered in the temple and not controlled by the priesthood. From this time on in Judaism, the Torah was more important than the temple. Likewise, for Christians, the living power of the Bible should be more important than any church building. Through Scripture the Holy Spirit brings people to abundant life."⁴

NEHEMIAH 8:7

"Since the people had lived in a foreign country all of their lives, they had lost some of their ability to understand Hebrew. Regardless, the Levites had the job of making sure the people knew what was being said. They were helping them bridge the cultural gap between the last seventy years in Babylonia with their cultural heritage as found in Scripture. It could not have been easy. Although God's Word is authoritative for life and faith and all matters of knowing God, it frequently takes hard work to understand the message of God written in a foreign language in a distant time and place."⁵

GOD'S LAW BRINGS JOY

NEHEMIAH 8:10

"This phrase refers to Yahweh's joy, Yahweh's good pleasure. What has Yahweh's good pleasure been? It has been to move the heart of Cyrus to allow them to return to the land to rebuild the temple, and it has been to bring Ezra and Nehemiah back to the land to lead the rebuilding of people and wall. Yahweh's good pleasure is for the people. Yahweh has taken delight in restoring them to the land, causing the rebuilding of the temple, and completing the project on the walls. What is their stronghold? Their stronghold is God's joy in saving, restoring, and protecting them."⁶

NEHEMIAH 8:12

"The completed walls, the throng and the conviviality were all peripheral or secondary. To have understood what God was saying was what made the occasion. It was a step from blind religiousness towards some degree of divine-human fellowship. Its full flowering would be in the new covenant with its assurance, 'they shall all know me'; but the old covenant already held much promise of its successor."⁷

CONTEXT

The events in Nehemiah 8 occurred in the seventh month, the holiest month for God's people and the beginning of the Hebrew calendar. On the first day, the people celebrated the Feast of Trumpets (also called Rosh Hashanah), a solemn day of rest from all work, which marked the start of a ten-day period of repentance. God commanded the people to blow the trumpets, likely rams' horns, to announce this period of repentance (Lev. 23:24). On the tenth day, God's people celebrated the Day of Atonement (also called Yom Kippur), the holiest day of the year (Lev. 16:1-34). The high priest entered the holy of holies in the temple only on this day to make sacrifices on behalf of the entire nation. The high priest also took a goat and confessed the sins of the people over the goat; then, the goat was led into the wilderness and released, symbolizing the nation's sins being carried away. On the fifteenth day, the Jews celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles (also called Feast of Booths), a time of rejoicing and remembering how God provided for His people during their forty years of wandering in the wilderness (Lev. 23:39-44).

THEOLOGY CONNECTION

Sanctification

After we are justified by faith, declared to be in right standing with God through the righteousness of Christ, we undergo a lifetime of sanctification, where we are continually made more like Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:16-26; 2 Thess. 2:13). Scripture speaks of sanctification as a present position (we have already been sanctified) and as a continuing process. Sanctification affects the whole person, transforming one's heart, mind, and character to reflect Jesus.

LEADERS' PRAYER

GOD, YOU HAVE TRANSFORMED OUR LIVES BY THE WORD WITH THE HELP OF YOUR SPIRIT. HELP US TO TREASURE YOUR WORD AND TO HONOR YOUR COMMANDS. AS WE DO, HELP US TO OVERFLOW WITH THE JOY THAT COMES FROM KNOWING YOU, FROM BEING YOUR SONS AND DAUGHTERS.





KICK STARTER

DID YOU KNOW?

Have you ever secretly hoped you'd come across a huge treasure in the ocean? Well, if you do, you might not be able to keep it. The Abandoned Shipwreck Act passed in 1987 states that any shipwreck found within three miles of the coast falls under United States property. In Florida, this even extends up to ten miles!⁸

These optional activities are designed to help your students interact. You'll find a Discussion Activity and a Cultural Connection, which touches on a relevant topic in today's teen culture. Each group is different, so adapt these activities to fit your group's needs. The goal is for students to connect more to the lesson as they connect to the topic and to one another.

1

HEARING OR LISTENING

SUPPLIES LIST: NONE

Ask the following questions, allowing time for students to share responses:

- **CAN YOU PAY ATTENTION TO MULTIPLE THINGS AT ONCE? FOR EXAMPLE, IF YOUR TV IS PLAYING LOUDLY, CAN YOU FOCUS ON SOMEONE SPEAKING TO YOU?**
- **WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HEARING AND LISTENING?**
- **WHAT TYPES OF SITUATIONS CALL FOR LISTENING RATHER THAN SIMPLY HEARING?**

Our culture is loud; we're surrounded by constant noise. Some of us can easily tune out the noise, but more and more of us struggle to focus. We hear the noise around us, but we struggle to listen. Listening requires that we focus our attention to gather meaning or understanding. Many of us hear God's Word, but are we listening to His voice for understanding?

2

CULTURAL CONNECTION

What's your greatest treasure? Think outside of material possessions. What do you consider most valuable in your life? Many of us might say we treasure our family members more than anything else. Maybe you treasure your friendships. How do you know what you treasure the most in life? You can tell what is of greatest value by looking at where you invest your time and energy. Your priorities reveal your greatest treasure. Jesus even taught that our hearts belong to what we treasure (Matt. 6:21). If we say we treasure God, then not only do our hearts belong to Him, but our priorities reflect that He matters. Our time and energy are spent in an effort to know Him and make Him known. So, examine your heart. What does your heart belong to? Though we may say we treasure Jesus, our lives say something else. Our priorities reveal that what we treasure most is self—our time, our comforts, our desires. What would it look like for your life to reflect that Jesus matters more than anything else—that He alone is your treasure?

DISCUSSION

MAIN POINT.

Our lives reveal our greatest treasure.

GOD'S LAW BRINGS GRIEF

READ NEHEMIAH 8:1-9



BESIDES THE TEMPLE AND CITY WALL, WHAT ELSE WAS BEING REBUILT?

Before the exile, the city wasn't the only thing to fall; the people fell too, individually and as a nation. They fell into sin, idol worship, and rebellion, refusing to return to the Lord, though He called out to them through the prophets. After bringing His people home from exile, God worked to restore and rebuild them. The people took part in a covenant renewal, learning from the sins of their past and committing to follow the Lord. As believers, we still fall into sin. **Through the Holy Spirit, God calls us to return to Him in repentance. He restores us and sanctifies us, making us more like His Son—a lifetime process of rebuilding us each time we fall.**



WHY DO YOU THINK THE PEOPLE *VALUED* GOD'S WORD SO DEEPLY? WHY IS IT EASY FOR US TO TAKE IT LIGHTLY OR IGNORE IT?

God was rebuilding His people—internally, in their hearts and minds. They were starting over after exile and needed to remember their identity. They looked to God's Word to reveal it, but more importantly, to tell them about God. The Word pierced their hearts as they remembered: God created the universe with authority and care, established a covenant, led His people out of Egypt to the promised land, and gave them the law to show them how to live and thrive. The Word continued to cut down deep as they remembered false gods and idols, as they remembered exile. They wept as they realized that God, in His goodness and mercy, kept His promise and brought them home. And isn't this the gospel and our story too? The Word is a valuable treasure, helping us to remember: God created us with care, adopted us, freed us from the bondage of sin through the promised Savior. The Word and the Holy Spirit lead us toward our eternal home. And when we struggle to be faithful, God reminds how through His "living and active" Word (Heb. 4:12). **The Bible isn't a burdensome list of rules; it's the story of God pursuing us since the very beginning and never, ever stopping. And we get to hold His words in our hands—an incredible treasure!**



WHY IS CULTURE (BELIEVERS TOO) OFTEN UNBOTHERED BY SIN? WHEN IS THE LAST TIME YOU WEPT OVER YOURS?

The people traced Israel's history with sin; in the process, they realized their sin. They wept over a broken nation and over their brokenness. Why? **Because tracing God's goodness—His faithfulness to the people, despite how they turned away—made their sinfulness more obvious and more offensive.** Truthfully, we aren't bothered by our sin. **We're too busy justifying it and doing our best to avoid the painful process of conviction; we'd rather numb out than weep.** Jesus bled for our sin; He surrendered His breath. We cheapen His sacrifice when we treat our sin lightly, and this knowledge should devastate us.

GOD'S LAW BRINGS JOY

READ NEHEMIAH 8:10-12

WHAT IS JOY? READ PROVERBS 17:22. WHAT DOES JOY DO FOR US? HOW HAS JOY STRENGTHENED YOU OR SOMEONE ELSE WHEN LIFE WAS TOUGH?

Joy is more than happiness, not based on circumstances or the pleasures of this world. For believers, joy is delighting in who God is and in what He has done. When we walk with the Lord and He sanctifies us, we produce spiritual fruit, including joy (Gal. 5:22-23). **Joy is fruit that comes from a source—a byproduct of being connected to the vine, to Jesus (John 15:4-5).** So, we can't manufacture joy on our own. Some of us have searched for it in the things of this world and failed. Charles Spurgeon explained that joy is realizing God shares Himself with us: "His power, my protection; his wisdom, my guidance; his faithfulness, my foundation; his grace, my salvation."⁹ **The "joy of the Lord" strengthens us because it isn't rooted in ourselves at all but in God's character, God's promises, and God's presence.** This joy carries us through seasons of pain and suffering, reminding us of the assurance of heaven.



WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE IN HEARING GOD'S WORD AND UNDERSTANDING IT?

We can hear the Word and not obey it (James 1:22). We can grow up in church, have godly parents, hear sermons, go to summer camps and youth events, yet live like the world—we're **exposed to the Word but unchanged because it didn't get inside of us.** Knowing about God isn't the same as knowing God through relationship. Understanding God's Word—believing, studying, applying—changes us from the inside. This is our joy!

WHAT DOES THE COMMAND TO REJOICE REVEAL ABOUT GOD'S DESIRE FOR US ONCE WE'VE REPENTED OF SIN?

The people felt genuine heartache over their sin and repented. God's move was to restore, not condemn. Though mourning over sin was right, the people didn't need to dwell there. On this holy day, God commanded them to rejoice. Why? Because they had great reason: He had kept His promises, showed mercy, and preserved a remnant; He hadn't forgotten them. **Their rejoicing could be great because their forgiveness was great.** The same is true for us. When we sin, we sometimes dwell in the guilt and shame after we've genuinely repented. **We need godly sorrow that leads us to repentance (2 Cor. 7:10), but God's heart is to restore us and forgive us.** And that is great reason to rejoice.

WRAP-UP



WHAT AREAS OF YOUR LIFE SHOW THAT GOD'S WORD MATTERS TO YOU? ARE THERE AREAS THAT SAY OTHERWISE? WHAT STOPS YOU FROM TREASURING THE WORD?

The truth is that your daily life reflects how much you value God's Word—in your language, your attitude, your behavior on social media. If you treasure Scripture, then you commit time to reading it, studying it, and applying it. And this spiritual discipline will transform your life. How?

The Holy Spirit will guide you and speak to you; the Holy Spirit, who searches and knows the mind of God, lives within you and helps you understand God's commands. He teaches you (1 Cor. 2:10-12)!

Many of us might feel that understanding God's Word is too difficult; we may complain that it feels like studying for school; we may make excuses that we don't have enough time to devote to it. But consider that the people in this passage so longed for God's Word that they stood for roughly six hours just to hear it! We have something better: We hold the Word of the God in our hands! If you devote yourself to understanding it, God will help you. **Approach it with a heart longing to know God and be changed by Him, and He will meet you there in the pages.**

SACKCLOTH AND DUST

MAIN POINT.

Confessing our sin frees us; worshiping God changes us.



CHRIST CONNECTION

God's people remembered all He had done and promised to be faithful. God is gracious and compassionate. All along, God has been faithful to people who are unfaithful. We experience God's grace and compassion in Jesus, who gave His life so we can receive mercy and life forever.



GIFT OF WORSHIP

This week, we're covering the passages and main points below. But we encourage you to read all of the content on the timeline as you prepare to teach.

Nehemiah 9–11

CONFESSION PROMPTS WORSHIP

NEHEMIAH 9:1-3,26-29,33-38

1 Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth on their heads. 2 And the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. 3 And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day; for another quarter of it they made confession and worshiped the LORD their God. . . . 26 “Nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their back and killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you, and they committed great blasphemies. 27 Therefore you gave them into the hand of their enemies, who made them suffer. And in the time of their suffering they cried out to you and you heard them from heaven, and according to your great mercies you gave them saviors who saved them from the hand of their enemies. 28 But after they had rest they did evil again before you, and you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies, so that they had dominion over them. Yet when they turned and cried to you, you heard from heaven, and many times you delivered them according to your mercies. 29 And you warned them in order to turn them back to your law. Yet they acted presumptuously and did not obey your commandments, but sinned against your rules, which if a person does them, he shall live by them, and they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck and would not obey. . . . 33 Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly. 34 Our kings, our princes, our priests, and our fathers have not kept your law or paid attention to your commandments and your warnings that you gave them. 35 Even in their own kingdom, and amid your great goodness that you gave them, and in the large and rich land that you set before them, they did not serve you or turn from their wicked works. 36 Behold, we are slaves this day; in the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves. 37 And its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins. They rule over our bodies and over our livestock as they please, and we are in great distress. 38 “Because of all this we make a firm covenant in writing; on the sealed document are the names of our princes, our Levites, and our priests.

WORSHIP PROMPTS COMMITMENT

NEHEMIAH 10:28-29

28 “The rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all who have separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, their daughters, all who have knowledge and understanding, 29 join with their brothers, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God’s Law that was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord and his rules and his statutes.

BEFORE YOU TEACH

MAIN POINT.

Confessing our sin frees us; worshiping God changes us.

Leaders: Don't shy away from conviction; instead, model how it is a gift that brings freedom.

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

CONFESSION PROMPTS WORSHIP

NEHEMIAH 9:1-3

"The goal of understanding God's word is to apply it to one's life; thus, the people needed to confess where they had failed to follow God. Then they would be in a right relationship with God and could demonstrate their humble submission by bowing in worship before him."¹⁰

NEHEMIAH 9:26-29,33-36

"The primary theme of the prayer is God's gracious self-revelation of himself in history and Israel's miserable response to his revelation. . . . The author of this passage is restating the oft-repeated confession that God's benevolent initiative has been characteristically met by man's defiance and self-will."¹¹

WORSHIP PROMPTS COMMITMENT

NEHEMIAH 10:28-29

"They have separated themselves from something to something. They have separated from certain things: the abominations of the idolaters. And they have separated to the Torah of God. This word 'Torah' refers to all that Moses taught in the first five books of the Old Testament. . . . Some might be inclined to ask whether this might be a little bit legalistic. The answer is that this is not legalistic at all. These people have been mercifully redeemed and brought back from exile. It must be kept in mind that they were already redeemed before the commitment to obey was made at the exodus and before they made a covenant to keep the covenant here at the return to the land. . . . God does not teach His people legalism. This commitment is not a legalistic covenant. They are entering into this covenant having been mercifully redeemed and as a sign of their commitment to respond to the mercy that has been shown to them."¹²

"Separation from the neighboring peoples was important to maintain the distinctive beliefs and ethical principles of the community. God still wants his people to be separate by repudiating values and beliefs that are contrary to his will. We must take seriously the scriptural emphasis on separation without falling into an isolationist situation. The other danger is to accommodate the world so much that we fall into a syncretism that loses our Christian way of thinking and acting. In the situation of Ezra and Nehemiah, separation was imperative to secure the continuity of the redeemed community."¹³



CONTEXT

Previously, Ezra's reading from God's Word led the people to repent. Then, they spent the next several weeks observing Hebrew festivals: the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Festival of Tabernacles. Once the celebrations came to a close, the people assembled again to hear God's Word and to spend time in confession and in worship. In chapter 9, we read their prayer, which summarized the entire storyline of the Old Testament—the story of God's work in His creation and in His people's victories and failures. Hearing the history of God's faithfulness contrasted with Israel's history of rebellion prompted the people to renew their covenant with the Lord. Israel took part in a covenant renewal at several points in the nation's history. Like Israel, we rebel and must practice renewal. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we can experience daily renewal by cultivating spiritual disciplines like prayer, reading God's Word, resting, and worshiping (2 Cor. 4:16).

THEOLOGY CONNECTION

Worship

While many reduce worship to an event or the singing of worship songs, worship is first and foremost something of the heart and extends to all areas of life. The aim and focus of worship is God, giving Him the praise and adoration He deserves. Worship should be carried out not only at a personal level within a Christian's life but also in joining with other Christians in the corporate act of worship and stewarding our gifts for the glory of God. Corporate worship serves to uplift and strengthen other Christians, but it also serves as a witness to nonbelievers of the greatness of God.

LEADERS' PRAYER

GOD, CONVICTION IS A GIFT THAT DRAWS US CLOSER TO YOU AND MAKES US MORE LIKE YOUR SON. HELP US TO RESPOND IN REPENTANCE. WORSHIP IS A GIFT THAT REMINDS US OF YOUR GREATNESS AND YOUR FAITHFULNESS. MAY OUR WORSHIP LEAD US TO GREATER OBEDIENCE AND A DESIRE TO KEEP THE COMMITMENTS WE'VE MADE TO YOU.



KICK STARTER

RATE IT!

How likely are you to keep your word, even when you don't want to (1=Sorry, I'm out; 10=I'm locked in)?



These optional activities are designed to help your students interact. You'll find a Discussion Activity and a Cultural Connection, which touches on a relevant topic in today's teen culture. Each group is different, so adapt these activities to fit your group's needs. The goal is for students to connect more to the lesson as they connect to the topic and to one another.

1

WHAT YOU KNOW NOW

SUPPLIES LIST: NONE

Ask the following questions, allowing time for students to share responses:

- **IF YOU COULD GO BACK AND RELIVE SOMETHING FROM YOUR CHILDHOOD, WHAT WOULD IT BE?**
- **IF YOU COULD TALK TO YOUR YOUNGER SELF, WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE?**
- **WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED ABOUT GOD THAT WOULD'VE HELPED YOU IN THE PAST?**

Looking back, many of us probably wish we could relive certain parts of our childhoods. Then again, we probably have parts of our past we'd never want to revisit. We know more now than we did then. And if we're walking with Jesus, we know Him more deeply. Often, in looking back, we can see God's faithfulness more clearly, as we'll see in the lesson today.

2

CULTURAL CONNECTION

Who helps you to be a better version of yourself? Who brings out your best qualities by motivating you and inspiring you? Whose commitment to Jesus influences you to desire a closer walk with Him? These are the people who call us up to a higher standard than what we'd settle for on our own. They call us out too, helping us see where we've allowed sin to creep into our lives. Here's the deal: Worship makes us better. That may sound odd because worship isn't a person, but worship places us in God's holy presence. We can't come away unchanged. Now, God is with us at all times, but when we worship God in spirit and in truth (John 4:24), we intentionally lift up God's name, draw closer to His heart, and position ourselves to hear His voice more clearly. Worship is an invitation for the Holy Spirit to expose our rough edges, and through the power of conviction, to smooth them. And we're better because we're made more like Jesus in the process.

DISCUSSION

MAIN POINT.

Confessing our sin frees us; worshiping God changes us.

CONFESSION PROMPTS WORSHIP

READ NEHEMIAH 9:1-3,26-29,33-38

HOW DO YOU REACT WHEN SOMEONE CALLS YOU OUT? INSTEAD OF BECOMING DEFENSIVE, HOW CAN WE THINK DIFFERENTLY ABOUT CONVICTION?

Repenting is admitting that God is right about our sin and giving up the fight to prove we had a reason to sin—that our situation was different. **The Holy Spirit convicting us, or showing us our sin, is an invitation to agree with God and repair our relationship with Him.** The closer we walk with God, the more easily we recognize our sin, but we react less defensively. Why? **Because conviction isn't a cruel attack on us but on our sin; we welcome confession and repentance because they are gifts that draw us closer to God.**



WHY DID REMEMBERING THEIR HISTORY PROMPT THE PEOPLE TO CONFESS THEIR SIN? WHY DID IT RESULT IN WORSHIP?

The people saw two truths when they looked back: God was faithful and they weren't. In revisiting their history, the people saw that the nation's response to God's constant goodness was a cycle of rebellion. The people confessed sins of the past and the present and were moved to worship—to praise God's name and give Him glory. This is the right response for us too. When we look back, we'll see that God's goodness marks our lives, prompting us to confess our sin. **Because God is faithful to forgive us (1 John 1:9), our only move is to worship Him, giving Him glory for saving us through the blood of His Son, Jesus.**



WHAT DOES IT SHOW ABOUT GOD THAT HE KEPT *RESCUING* HIS PEOPLE WHEN THEY KEPT *TURNING* FROM HIM? HOW DO WE GET CAUGHT UP IN THE SAME CYCLE?

If we look at their behavior, Israel was a lot like people who continue to hurt us, betray us, or gossip about us after they've apologized and promised to stop. God loved them, freed them from slavery, gave them a good land and His law, provided for them; in return, they "cast [His] law behind their back" (v. 26). They treated God's words as meaningless and bowed before false gods and idols, which had only betrayed them with false promises. God's people chased worldly power and pleasure and came up empty. But God was faithful to call them back. While we would've probably turned around and walked away from people who behaved like Israel, God didn't. Why? **Because God is absolute goodness. He made a covenant to bless all people through Israel—to bring a Savior. God was going to be faithful to this promise, even when His people were unfaithful to Him.** We get caught up in a cycle a lot like Israel. God loves us, frees us, leads us, and provides for us, and in return, we ignore His Word and His voice and chase after the world. We come up empty every time. **We'd probably walk away from ourselves, but God has never left us and never will leave us.** Instead, He calls us to return to Him through repentance.

WORSHIP PROMPTS COMMITMENT

READ NEHEMIAH 10:28-29



DO YOU MORE EASILY OBEY PEOPLE YOU TRUST? HOW MIGHT THIS APPLY TO OBEYING GOD?

Looking back at their history only proved to the people that they had every reason to trust God. He had been faithful to His words; they could trust He would be faithful moving forward. Though we are supposed to obey people in authority, we don't always obey easily. But when we trust someone—we know they love us and care for us—we usually find it easier to obey them. Why? Because we know with certainty that they'd never ask us to do something that could harm us. **Trust motivates obedience. If we trust God—and we have no reason not to—then we have every reason to obey Him. We can commit to follow Him because He leads us with love and care.**



WHY DO WE EASILY MAKE PROMISES TO GOD AT CAMPS OR OTHER EVENTS YET STRUGGLE TO FOLLOW THROUGH? WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?

Many of us make commitments at camps and retreats. In the moment, we truly mean what we promise. We're surrounded by worship and God's Word in a godly community. Then, we come home and re-enter "normal life." We return to the same people and places—the same temptations and habits—and the emotional high wears off. **We must decide to follow through even when we don't feel like it anymore; our commitment has to be rooted in something deeper than our feelings.** Here's the deal: You don't have to get caught up in the cycle of emotional vows. Sure, camps and retreats are great places to strengthen our faith! But expect your emotions to die down. And then, keep going! **The truth God revealed to you there is the same truth everywhere else. You won't do it perfectly, but you can live out the commitments you've made to God when you stay connected to Him through prayer, the Word, and godly community!** God has given you everything you need to be faithful (2 Pet. 1:3)!

HOW COULD WRITING DOWN THEIR OATH MAKE THE PEOPLE ACCOUNTABLE? HOW CAN WE CREATE ACCOUNTABILITY FOR OURSELVES TODAY (9:38)?

The people couldn't deny their vow. Writing it down held them accountable to God, to one another, and to future generations. **We can share our commitments with godly friends, write them in a prayer journal, or set reminders on our phones.** Creating accountability helps us remember and keep our vows.



WRAP-UP

DO YOU FEEL LIKE GOD GETS TIRED OF FORGIVING YOU FOR THE SAME SINS? HOW DOES THIS PASSAGE REASSURE YOU?

Maybe you've made promises to God many times. You had the best intentions of keeping them, but over time, you fell back into the same sin. The more times this happens, you may struggle with feeling like God is just over it—over *you*. **The story of God's people shows us that God never tires of forgiving us when we truly repent.** In fact, His kindness is what leads us to repentance (Rom. 2:4). **If you've struggled with falling back into the same sin over and over, then it's time to break that pattern for good.** You likely need accountability—people to walk with you and help you stay connected to God's Word. Who can you share your struggle with? Who can you ask to ask *you* the tough questions? You may also fall into the same sinful habits because you never removed idols or temptations from your life. Maybe you need to turn your phone over to your parents at night. Maybe you need to break off a dating relationship instead of trying to change the person. **One thing is certain: God has given you a way out if you're willing to take it (1 Cor. 10:13).**

THE DAY IS COMING

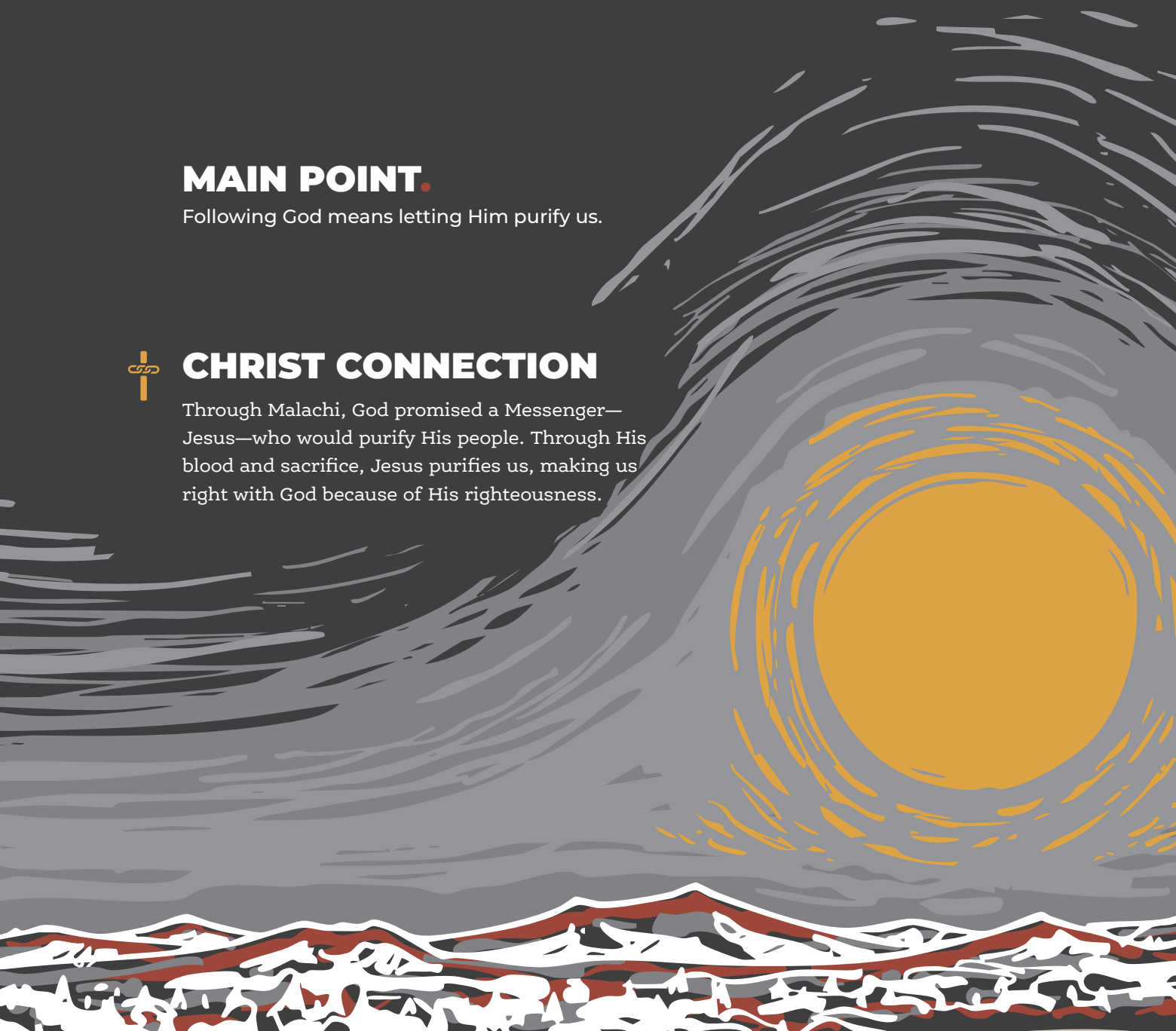
MAIN POINT.

Following God means letting Him purify us.



CHRIST CONNECTION

Through Malachi, God promised a Messenger—Jesus—who would purify His people. Through His blood and sacrifice, Jesus purifies us, making us right with God because of His righteousness.



REMEMBERING THE PAST

This week, we're covering the passages and main points below. But we encourage you to read all of the content on the timeline as you prepare to teach.

Malachi

GOD WILL PURIFY HIS PEOPLE

MALACHI 3:1-6

1 “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the LORD whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. 2 But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. 3 He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD. 4 Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years. 5 “Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts. 6 “For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.

GOD WILL HEAL HIS PEOPLE

MALACHI 4:1-6

1 “For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. 2 But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. 3 And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts. 4 “Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. 5 “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. 6 And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”

BEFORE YOU TEACH

MAIN POINT.

Following God means letting Him purify us.

Leaders: Celebrate the progress you've made through Scripture with this last passage from the Old Testament! Spend time reflecting on seeing Jesus in the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings.

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

GOD WILL PURIFY HIS PEOPLE

MALACHI 3:2-3

"Malachi 3:2-3 cannot be about Jesus' first coming, since Jesus did not come to refine, but to redeem. Jesus came to give His life up as a sacrifice for all of mankind. He came to emancipate sinners and establish His kingdom. At His second coming, though, He will act as judge and purifier."¹⁴

MALACHI 3:6

"Most of the time, when the Israelites are referred to as the children of Jacob, it's a rebuke for their disobedience. It's a reference to the name of their forefather before the divine blessing was bestowed. Yet, even though they were faithless, God would remain faithful to them, as He was to their father, Jacob."¹⁵

GOD WILL HEAL HIS PEOPLE

MALACHI 4:2

"To confirm that Jesus was the rising of the sun, we may also look to Luke 1:76-79. . . . In this passage John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, has been mute for a season. When the silence is broken, his first utterance is a prophecy. He declares that John is preparing the way for 'the Dawn from on high.' Not surprisingly, John's ministry would be to prepare the way for Jesus Christ."¹⁶

MALACHI 4:5-6

"That the Lord would send a messenger to prepare the way for Messiah's coming was prophesied in 3:1. Here this forerunner is called the prophet Elijah, not the ancient prophet reincarnated but one with the same prophetic power and mission—calling the nation back to God (v. 6). In Matthew 17:10-13, Jesus explained that John the Baptist was the Elijah who prepared the way for his first coming (Matt. 11:13-14) but made clear that another Elijah was yet future. This future Elijah would prepare the way for Messiah's second coming—before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes."¹⁷

CONTEXT

Background: Malachi was the final prophetic voice in the Old Testament period, until John the Baptist prophesied roughly 450 years later. Though the author could've been a prophet named Malachi, which means "my messenger," the book doesn't reveal any information about his life. The backdrop of the prophetic book is the postexilic period in Judah, likely somewhere during or just after the events in Ezra and Nehemiah. About one hundred years after the return from Babylon, Israel still served Persia. Many of God's people were dissatisfied with God because He hadn't restored Israel's glory. Because of the people's spiritual laziness and lack of faith, the nation fell into a state of corruption and injustice. The book's contents are presented in a question/answer format as disputes between God and His people, though most of the dialogue belongs to God. Malachi shed light on the grim reality that God's people were still just as unfaithful as they were before exile. Malachi's words exposed Israel's corruption, reassured the nation of God's love, and pointed to the coming Messiah, who would heal the world of sin and injustice. The message was a "call for Israel to return to God before the Messiah comes to earth, for it was written to a people who lived in expectation of Him, but who had not yet seen Him."¹⁸ The same could be said to the unfaithful today: Turn to the Lord and wait with hope for the day of Jesus's return.

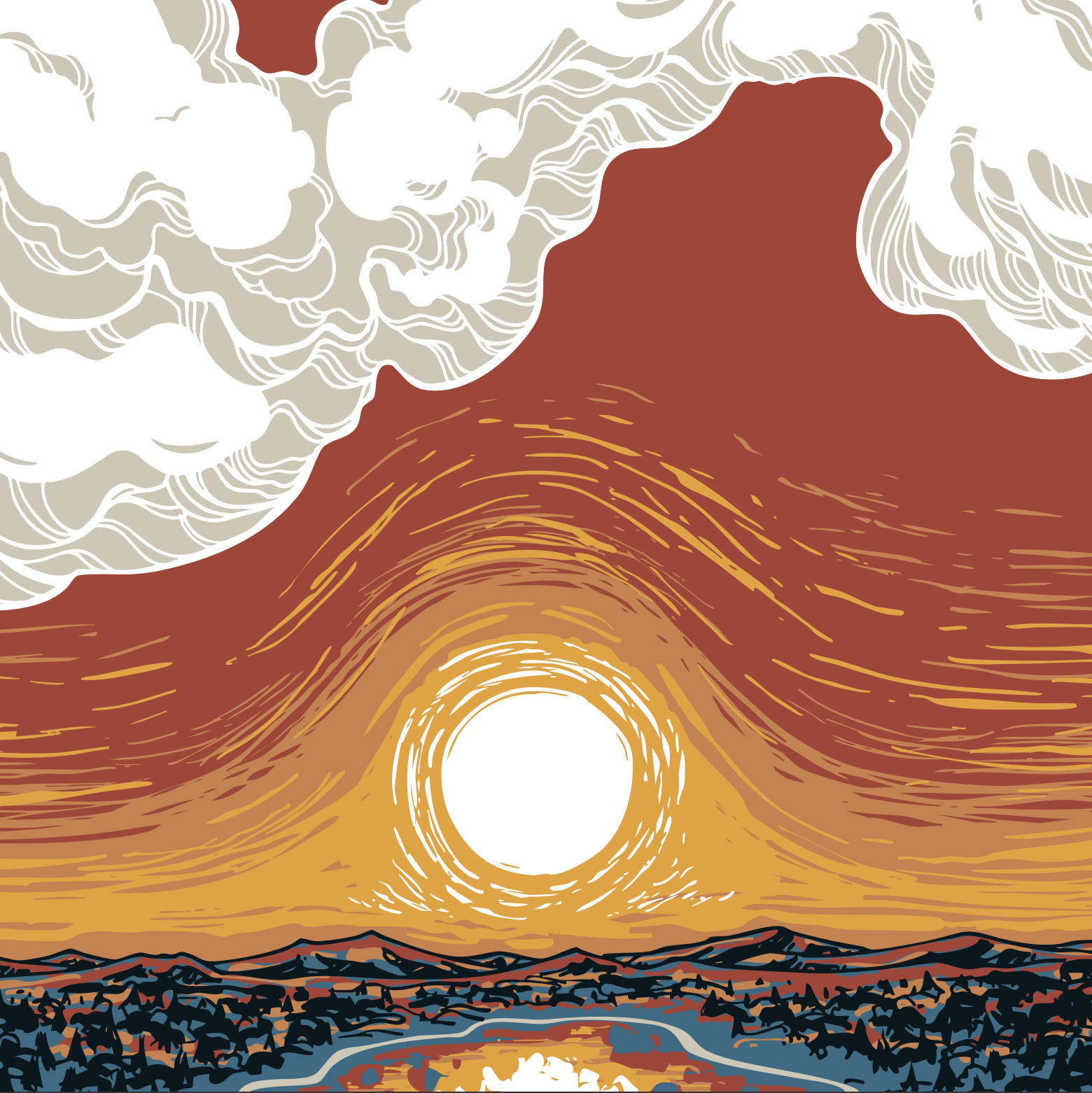
THEOLOGY CONNECTION

Imputation

When God pardoned sinners at the cross, our sins were imputed, or transferred, to Christ, who became sin on our behalf. Our sin was imputed to Christ, and Christ's righteousness was imputed to us (Rom. 5:17; 1 Cor. 1:30). When God the Father looks at those who have trusted in Christ, He does not see their sins but the righteousness of Christ as belonging to them (Rom. 4:6).

LEADERS' PRAYER

GOD, THANK YOU FOR JESUS. BECAUSE OF HIS SACRIFICE, WE DON'T HAVE TO FEAR THE DAY OF JUDGMENT. THANK YOU FOR THE WORK YOU DO IN OUR LIVES TO PURIFY AND REFINE US. HELP US TO LIVE AS PEOPLE WHO HAVE GREAT HOPE.



KICK STARTER

♥ HEART CHECK

Last week, we talked about not following through with commitments we make to the Lord. How have you taken steps to follow through with seeking God and leaving sin behind?

These optional activities are designed to help your students interact. You'll find a Discussion Activity and a Cultural Connection, which touches on a relevant topic in today's teen culture. Each group is different, so adapt these activities to fit your group's needs. The goal is for students to connect more to the lesson as they connect to the topic and to one another.

1

MEMORY

SUPPLIES LIST: NONE

Ask the following questions, allowing time for students to share responses:

- **IS MEMORIZING INFORMATION EASY OR DIFFICULT FOR YOU?**
- **WHEN HAS THE ABILITY TO MEMORIZE SOMETHING BENEFITED YOU?**
- **THINK BACK AS FAR AS YOU CAN. WHAT'S YOUR EARLIEST MEMORY?**

Some of us have the ability to memorize a lot of information. We're able to lock it in, benefiting us on tests and in other situations. Others of us struggle with remembering, and if we think back to our earliest memory, we can't think back very far. God calls us to remember His Word, and even though we may struggle in our own strength, He has given us the Holy Spirit to help us.

2

CULTURAL CONNECTION

Have you ever heard the phrase, "Don't forget where you came from"? We usually say this to someone who has reached a higher status in life. What we mean is that remembering our beginning, our history, and our progress is important. We mean that looking back is valuable because we can see how far we've come. Looking back helps us to remain humble and grateful instead of becoming arrogant. In our walk with the Lord, forgetting where we came from is dangerous because we forget that we were dead in our sin and slaves to sin. We risk thinking our goodness comes from our ability instead of from knowing Jesus and being transformed by Him. But when we remember where we came from, we are filled with gratitude. We remember that we were spiritually dead and without hope. We realize that we can only boast in Jesus because without Him, we would be lost (2 Cor. 10:17).

DISCUSSION

MAIN POINT.

Following God means letting Him purify us.

GOD WILL PURIFY HIS PEOPLE

READ MALACHI 3:1-6

Leaders: Explain that the passage is God's response to the people asking, "Where is the God of justice?" (Mal. 2:17).

WHAT ARE PEOPLE'S ISSUES WITH GOD OR REASONS FOR UNBELIEF TODAY?

God's people accused Him of being unfair, loving evil, and allowing their enemies to prosper (2:17). They even questioned His love (1:2). **They based their understanding of God's character on their circumstances, a result of their sin.** People still accuse God of being unfair, of allowing bad things to happen to good people. But really, no one is good because of sin (Rom. 3:10). People struggle to believe because they've felt deep pain or witnessed injustice. **The truth is that pain and injustice are results of the fall, of sin. The truth is that God is with us in our pain and calls us out of sin. The truth is that God is so just, so good, and so loving that He sent Jesus as a remedy for our sin.**



SINCE GOD DOESN'T CHANGE (V. 6), WHAT CAUSES DISTANCE IN OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM?

You've probably felt distance between yourself and a friend. You didn't talk or hang out as much; you stopped being a part of each other's daily lives. The friendship faded, likely because both of you changed, which is normal. God explained to the Jews that He never changes. **God's character is always the same—always good.** The people were distant from God because they had changed. **If you once walked closely with God and now feel distant, evaluate when and how you changed.** Have you stopped spending time with Him in prayer and in the Word? Have your priorities shifted? What changed in you?



WHO ARE THE TWO MESSENGERS IN 3:1? WHY DID MALACHI THEN ASK WHO WOULD BE ABLE TO STAND WHEN THE "MESSENGER OF THE COVENANT" COMES?

Malachi prophesied about a messenger clearing the way for another Messenger—the One the people were seeking, the One coming into His temple, the One bringing a new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34). Jesus affirmed that the messenger who cleared the way was John the Baptist (Matt. 11:7-14). The other Messenger Malachi prophesied about was Jesus, the Messiah. In this passage, Malachi spoke of Jesus's first coming (v. 1) and His second coming (vv. 2-5), when He would refine and purify His people. He asked who could endure and stand when Jesus returned, a rhetorical question designed to encourage the people to evaluate their hearts. The Lord explained that He would come in judgment against sorcerers, adulterers, liars, oppressors, and those who don't fear Him (v. 5). **The Jews likely didn't see themselves in this description, but the book of Malachi revealed that they were all these things and more. And so are we.** God called them—He calls us—away from sin; He refines and purifies us. So, who can stand when Jesus returns? Only those who've confessed Him as Lord because He was the acceptable sacrifice. **Our redemption is great because our sin is great, and we're righteous only because of Christ's righteousness.**

GOD WILL HEAL HIS PEOPLE

READ MALACHI 4:1-6

HOW IS THE FIRE'S PURPOSE IN 4:1 DIFFERENT FROM THE FIRE'S PURPOSE IN 3:2-3?

The fires in these passages have very different purposes, one for the wicked and one for the people of God. The fire in verse 4:1 is destructive, all-consuming. This fire will reduce all wickedness to stubble, the unusable part of grain left behind after a harvest that burns immediately in fire. This fire will leave no branches behind—not even a root! In other words, wickedness and evil will have no hope of reviving, and those who don't belong to God will be held accountable. The fire in 3:2-3 is a refining fire, not a destructive fire. **This fire will cleanse and purify God's people of all sin, ridding us of everything that's offensive to God.** This fire for believers perfects us, making us like Christ and clothing us in white.



READ VERSE 2. WHAT DOES THE LORD WANT US TO REALIZE ABOUT THE REALITY OF BELONGING TO HIM?

Those who fear the Lord are compared to young calves being released at daybreak from a stall. After the long night, we'll break into a joyful run across fields of freedom on the day Jesus, the "sun of righteousness," returns to heal and restore everything that is now broken. **Think of the joy we'll experience when we're finally and forever released from a stall and a harness—from all sickness, pain, sorrow, disappointment, anxiety, depression, worry, heartache, and death. The weight and burden of our fall to sin will fall.** We'll enter eternal joy with our Father through Jesus, our Healer. This assurance gives us hope here and now as we wait.



WHAT WAS GOD'S LAST INSTRUCTION TO ISRAEL (V. 4)? BASED ON THEIR HISTORY, WHY WOULD GOD SAY THIS?

God would not speak through another prophet until the time of Jesus's birth—over four hundred years later! His last word of instruction was to remember the Word of God, to cling to the Torah, as Israel embarked on a season of silence and darkness. **They couldn't know God or follow God without following His Word; neither can we.** The Lord stressed the importance of remembering the law when prophetic voices ceased. Would they remember it well enough to sustain them? Would they remember all Yahweh had done on their behalf, how He remained faithful in their wandering, how He tenderly preserved them? **Israel's history proved that forgetting leads to unfaithfulness; remembering would tether their hearts to truth and faithfulness.**

WRAP-UP



HOW HAS GOD DIRECTED US IN THE SAME WAY HE DID ISRAEL (4:4)—TO REMEMBER? WHAT HAS HE GIVEN US TO HELP US?

Though God paused speaking through prophets, He still spoke through His Word; He was never absent. The call to remember wasn't just for Israel but for us too. **If we forget the ways God has been faithful—how He kept His promise to send a Savior—then we forget the costly price for our sin. If we forget God's Word, then we struggle with our identity; as Israel looked to pagan nations, we look to the world around us to tell us who we are. We forget how to live as God's people.** Israel had God's Word on scrolls housed in synagogues; we have God's Word in our hands! And unlike Israel, we have God's presence through the Holy Spirit living within us, guiding us to know God's will. Jesus stressed these truths to the disciples; He called them to remember all He had taught them. He reminded them that He would be with them always, even to the end of the age (Matt. 28:20); He commanded them to remember His broken body and spilled blood through the Lord's supper (1 Cor. 11:23-26). We have all these gifts helping us to remember as we wait for Jesus's return.

THE TRUE LIGHT

MAIN POINT.

Our lives should point to Jesus and prepare others to know Him.



CHRIST CONNECTION

God spoke through Old Testament prophets, like Isaiah and Malachi, and shared His plan to send Jesus into the world to save people from sin. When the time had come, God called John to be a witness for Jesus.



POINTING TO THE LIGHT

This week, we're covering the passages and main points below. But we encourage you to read all of the content on the timeline as you prepare to teach.

Luke 1; John 1

JOHN FULFILLED A PROMISE

LUKE 1:5-17

5 In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. 7 But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years. 8 Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, 9 according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense. 11 And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. 12 And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him. 13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. 14 And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. 16 And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, 17 and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

THE LIGHT WAS COMING

JOHN 1:6-9

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. 8 He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. 9 The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.

BEFORE YOU TEACH

MAIN POINT.

Our lives should point to Jesus and prepare others to know Him.

Leaders: As you study about John the Baptist, reflect on how you can be a witness to the true Light.

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

JOHN FULFILLED A PROMISE

LUKE 1:7

“The mention of Zechariah and Elizabeth’s childlessness and their being past childbearing age points to the human impossibility of the coming events and heightens the miraculous character of God’s intervention in their son’s birth. Luke assumed that his readers would recall similar situations in the OT in which God blessed the barren with a son who was uniquely called to fulfill a divine task.”¹⁹

LUKE 1:8-9

“According to some estimates, there were approximately 20,000 priests in Palestine at this time. Each of the 24 divisions ministered in the Temple for one week twice during the year. Since there were hundreds of priests in a division, they were chosen by lot to officiate at certain rituals. Such a privilege as the burning of incense, which took place daily morning and evening, would fall to the lot of a given priest no more than once during his lifetime.”²⁰

LUKE 1:17

“The ministry of Elijah is particularly helpful in describing the character of the prophetic ministry of John. It was Elijah who had issued a dramatic challenge to the people of God in the face of a militant paganism (1 Kings 18:21-40). John the Baptizer was to fulfill a similar prophetic role in calling God’s people back to their covenant with God. John was not Elijah revived from the dead, but his ministry was to be characterized by a similar prophetic earnestness, a passion for reformation, and a forthright denunciation of ungodliness. His ministry was to be, in reality, a fulfillment of Malachi’s prophecy . . . (Mal. 4:5-6).”²¹

THE LIGHT WAS COMING

JOHN 1:6-9

“Although a lonely herald without credentials, [John] dared to be a prophet of the dawn in a day when the age of prophecy had been relegated to an idealized past. His only motivation was the sense of mission by which he came, his only purpose was to point beyond himself in witness, and his only message was of the light. We were introduced to many immensities in the first stanza of the Prologue, but here is a wonder worthy to stand beside them: a single man in touch with transcendence, a man obsessed with light when other men were content to live in the shadows, a man willing to renounce the securities of the status quo and to depend entirely upon the future to vindicate his hope.”²²



CONTEXT

The intertestamental period encompasses roughly four hundred years between the Old and New Testaments, from Malachi's prophecy to the prophecy of John the Baptist. Some scholars refer to this period as the "silent years" because God paused speaking through prophets. Though the Jews lived in a fairly peaceful state under Persia, the Greek invasion by Alexander the Great led to drastic change, as Greek culture infiltrated Judean culture. Alexander's successors continued to rule after his death, but the most notorious was Antiochus Epiphanes. He overthrew the priesthood, ordered Jews to worship Zeus, and set up a pagan altar, profaning God's temple with pig sacrifices. Mattathias Maccabeus, a Jewish priest, and his sons led a successful but costly revolt (the Maccabean revolt); the Jews won their independence, reinstated the priesthood, and rededicated the temple in December of 164 BC (the origin of Hanukkah—an eight-day celebration of God miraculously providing oil to light the menorah). In 63 BC, Rome conquered and occupied Israel, placing heavy taxes on the people. They searched desperately for One who could save them from governmental oppression—for the Messiah. In this world of darkness, the first flicker of light appeared with the birth of John the Baptist. He would pave the way, for the true Light was coming.

THEOLOGY CONNECTION

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, He often uses prayer to accomplish His divine purpose. 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.

LEADERS' PRAYER

GOD, HELP US TO TESTIFY ABOUT THE TRUE LIGHT. MAY ALL OF OUR WORDS AND ACTIONS POINT TO JESUS AND PAVE THE WAY FOR OTHERS TO KNOW HIM. MAY YOUR LIGHT WITHIN US POINT TO TRUTH AND SHED LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS.



KICK STARTER

DID YOU KNOW?

How long do most light bulbs last? History's longest-lasting light bulb is the Centennial Bulb, located at a fire station in Livermore, California. The light bulb has run continuously since its installation in 1901! The bulb's long run is likely due to its low wattage and continuous operation, which prevents the filament from breaking down.²³

These optional activities are designed to help your students interact. You'll find a Discussion Activity and a Cultural Connection, which touches on a relevant topic in today's teen culture. Each group is different, so adapt these activities to fit your group's needs. The goal is for students to connect more to the lesson as they connect to the topic and to one another.

1

BREAKING OR KEEPING

SUPPLIES LIST: NONE

Ask the following questions, allowing time for students to share responses:

- **WHEN HAS SOMEONE BROKEN A PROMISE THEY MADE TO YOU?**
- **HOW DOES IT FEEL FOR SOMEONE TO BREAK A PROMISE?**
- **WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN SOMEONE BREAKS A PROMISE TO YOU?**

At some point, we've all broken a promise or experienced someone breaking a promise they made to us. While some broken promises are easy for us to forgive, some destroy our relationship with the other person. Today, we'll see how God keeps all of His promises to us.

2

CULTURAL CONNECTION

Do promises mean anything to you? If you've ever had someone break a promise, then you may not take them seriously. You may even put up walls of distrust, requiring people to prove themselves over time before you believe them. Kept promises build trust; broken promises damage it. When we are hurt by broken promises, we may become hesitant to believe people when they say they'll do something or be something for us. We don't want to risk being hurt again by allowing ourselves to believe someone else's words. But we must realize that God isn't like people who've betrayed us. He isn't going to break a promise. He never, ever has; He never, ever will. God's promises have either already been fulfilled in Jesus's birth, death, and resurrection, or they'll be revealed when Jesus returns to make all things new. If you've been hurt by someone, know that God deserves your trust. He won't fail you; He won't leave you; He has already given His Son for you. God is truth (John 14:6). He is love (1 John 4:8). His Word is sure.

DISCUSSION

MAIN POINT.

Our lives should point to Jesus and prepare others to know Him.

JOHN FULFILLED A PROMISE

READ LUKE 1:5-17

HAVE YOU EVER PRAYED FOR A LONG TIME FOR SOMETHING AND FELT LIKE GOD WAS SILENT OR LATE?

Many of us know how waiting feels. Maybe you prayed for someone's healing or for someone to overcome addiction. Maybe you begged God to send you one good friend. But that person isn't healed or is still an addict; you're still lonely. Waiting for God's plans can be really difficult, causing us to wonder if God hears us. Zechariah had begged for a child, and though God seemed unresponsive, He heard every prayer. He had a better plan to give Zechariah a child. Our timing isn't always God's timing; our plans aren't always His plans. **God hears us; He isn't ignoring us; He isn't late in accomplishing His good plans for us.**



WHY DO YOU THINK GOD CHOSE AN OLDER, CHILDLESS COUPLE TO FULFILL HIS PROMISE IN MALACHI 4:5-6?

Zechariah and Elizabeth were "advanced in years," meaning they must've been past typical childbearing age. Elizabeth had been barren also. **Age and inability worked against them, but they had been faithful to the Lord, even when their prayers felt unanswered.** God wasn't limited by their age or inability and chose this couple because of their faithfulness, challenging people's assumptions about who God could use and how He could work. **John's birth magnified God's power to do the impossible and revealed His divine plan to send a messenger to prepare His people for the coming Messiah.**



WHY DO WE OFTEN NOT TRUST GOD'S TIMING? WHEN HAVE YOU WANTED GOD'S TIMING TO BE DIFFERENT?

Leaders: Share commentary about Zechariah's opportunity to burn the incense. Imagine a life-long prayer going unanswered—or so you thought. Of all times for Zechariah to be selected from almost 20,000 priests to serve inside of the temple, he was chosen for this moment in history—the moment God chose to send him a son and to send the Messiah. Though Zechariah and Elizabeth had prayed for a child and likely felt crushed and dejected, they remained faithful. Now, they would parent the one who would pave the way for their Savior, a plan God shared over seven hundred years prior through Isaiah (40:3-5) and again four hundred years prior through Malachi! Zechariah received a special revelation from God: God had heard his prayers. **The praying, the waiting, the disappointing years came together in the light of God's purpose. What felt like God's long silence was His careful, intentional preparation.** What does this show us? **God always hears us.** You may be praying, waiting, or battling disappointment; God's plans may be different than yours; His timing may not be your desired timing. But you can know that waiting isn't punishment; silence isn't neglect. **God hears you, and His ways are good because He is good.**

THE LIGHT WAS COMING

READ JOHN 1:6-9



WHAT'S MORE COMMON: SEEKING ATTENTION FOR OURSELVES OR GIVING ATTENTION TO OTHERS? WHY?

So much about our culture drives us to crave attention. We crave more likes and followers on social media. We crave comments; we desire to be seen. Maybe social media has conditioned us to believe that everyone needs to know about our achievements and to demand some type of recognition. What's rare is throwing attention off of ourselves and onto others. In the most beautiful way, John the Baptist did exactly this. **His lifestyle gained the world's attention, but instead of keeping it for himself and allowing it to inflate his ego, John lived to point to Jesus.** John's purpose was to be a witness to the Messiah so that through his testimony, others would know the Savior. What if we lived this way? What if our lives only and always testified to the Savior and helped prepare others to meet Him?

WHY DO WE NEED LIGHT? WHAT WOULD LIFE BE LIKE WITHOUT LIGHT?

If you're scared of the dark (and who isn't?), then a world without light would be terrifying. Our imaginations would run wild, creating all sorts of new fears about what may lurk in the darkness. Light gives comfort and heat; light reveals reality instead of illusion. Without light, we couldn't thrive. The world would fall into chaos, unable to sustain human life. **We require light to live.** Is it surprising that Jesus called Himself "the light of the world" (John 8:12)? **Spiritually, His existence gives us life and helps us thrive; Jesus is truth, illuminating the reality of sin and lighting our way to the Father.**



WHY WOULD JOHN NEED TO ANNOUNCE THAT "THE TRUE LIGHT" WAS COMING? WHAT DOES THIS TELL YOU ABOUT THE CONDITION OF THE WORLD?

In this context, "true" implies "perfect" or "ultimate." The writer conveys that all the lights before Jesus—the prophets, priests, and so on—had been imperfect, incomplete. **But the true Light was coming—the Light all the other lights pointed to all along (Isa. 9:2). John was the messenger yelling, "This Light, guys! This is the Light! Look to Him!"** Jesus perfectly revealed the way to the Father. But consider this: The world was so darkened by sin and hopelessness and the people were so blind spiritually that they risked missing the Light. **John's life was a mirror reflecting the Light, the Messiah, to the world.**

WRAP-UP



WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE SO THAT YOUR LIFE POINTS TO JESUS AND PREPARES OTHERS TO SEE HIM?

When the angel announced to Zechariah that he would have a son, he explained that the son would prepare people to meet Jesus (Luke 1:17). John was filled with the Holy Spirit, empowering him like Elijah to proclaim truth and call people to repentance. John would live in a way that pointed to Jesus instead of himself. As believers, many of us don't live this way. Sure, we may timidly share our faith in class if we absolutely have to, but most days, we're content to blend in as much as possible. **Instead of our lives pointing to Jesus—instead of our lives preparing people to meet Jesus by seeing His character reflected in us—we dim the light within us.** But the same Spirit who lived within John lives in us! Maybe you need to vocalize your faith and share the gospel with a friend or with someone who sits next to you in class. Maybe you need to love people who others ignore or make fun of in your school. Maybe you need to use godly language and drop the profanity. **Your life is a witness to Christ; your life speaks, even if you remain silent; your life can help others find the Light.**

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