

06

AND PROPHETS PROVISION

COMMENTARY


the **GOSPEL**PROJECT.

ADULTS



WINTER | 2025-26

GOD'S WORD FOR YOU

HOPE IN THE MIDST OF DARKNESS

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

Just as God promised to take care of Israel many times, He also warned them of the consequences of disobedience. But they failed to listen. Time and time again, they played the harlot with pagan gods, wanting the faithful blessings of the one true God without being faithful to Him.

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

And still, the people would not repent; so judgment came. First, the Assyrian army conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel and hauled off its people into captivity. But even witnessing this did not draw His people to repentance. And so the Babylonian army destroyed the Southern Kingdom of Judah and exiled its people.

God's people were prisoners in foreign lands, and the blessings of God seemed more distant than ever. But God was drawing His master plan together. At the close of the Old Testament, God restored His people to the land and the temple and Jerusalem were rebuilt. But then God went silent. For four hundred years, the people looked, listened, and waited—the stage was set for Jesus to come and crush the serpent's head.

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THE EDITOR

Though exiled, God's people are never without His presence. God will discipline us, but He will never be far. And even in the discipline, He is longing to be restored into relationship and fellowship with His people.

We see this in the exile through the lives of Daniel and his friends. We see God's constant provision of protection when His people live out lives of faith, even under persecution and struggle. We see God's providential hand at work to show the world that He is Almighty God.

We see this in God orchestrating the return of the Israelites to Jerusalem, rebuilding their temple and their walls. God made a way for right worship to return because He longs for the hearts of His people to be made right with Him. And through the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah, the people repented and confessed and returned to a yearning for God's Word and true worship of Him.

But the cycle of sin would probably continue. What hope was there of permanence in God's family, of complete restoration to the Father? The prophets foretold of a day when a true King will come, when complete rule and restoration will cause God's people to celebrate. Jesus Christ fulfilled that role of a King who would lead and be victorious, but not just over earthly battles, but over spiritual ones. He has already done that through His death and resurrection, conquering sin and death. And we await the day when He will return to judge all completely, getting rid of evil and bringing perfect purity and peace to His people.

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The Gospel Project for Adults

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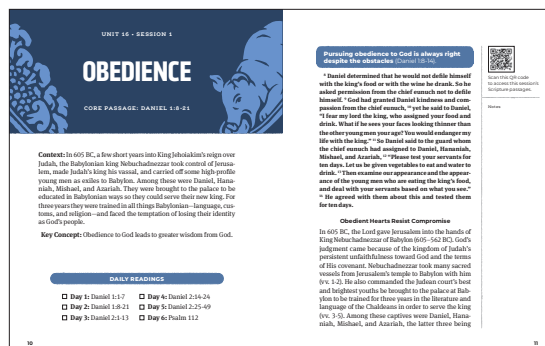
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HOW TO USE THE COMMENTARY

The Commentary is a vital tool in your personal and group experience with The Gospel Project for Adults. Here are different ways on how to make the most of your time with it:

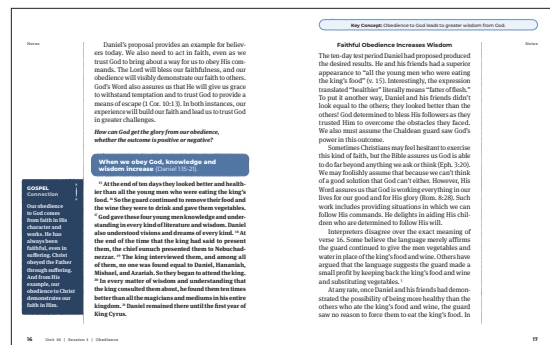
1) AS A SUPPLEMENT TO THE LEADER GUIDE



The Leader Guide takes you through the same Personal Preparation your group members will follow in their Personal Study Guide so you can experience that with them during the week. And then the Leader Guide provides you with step-by-step instructions for the weekly Group Experience, including the learning activity and application questions.

You can use the Commentary to supplement your learning and personal preparation. The context, key concept, and daily readings as well as the Scripture breakdowns and discussion questions in the Commentary will be the same as in the Personal Study Guide and the Leader Guide. But the bulk of the content is unique, so read through the Commentary to gain additional insight for your group's questions and discussions during the Group Experience.

2) AS A PERSONAL STUDY GUIDE



Your leader and your group may want to use the Commentary as a personal study guide for a more in-depth study of the Scripture passages in the sessions provided. Your group may be more knowledgeable and seasoned and may want to delve deeper into the nuances of Scripture as you explore how Scripture points to Christ throughout the Bible.

Leaders may also choose to use the Commentary as a personal study guide for their group because it is easier to read with a larger font than the Personal Study Guide.

If used in this way, the Commentary is designed to be used before the group time and then during the group time. Read through the session to be prepared for your group time. The context, key concept, and daily readings will give you the background and focus you need to study. The various headings and subheadings give you the bullet points that connect to the key concept. Answer the questions provided to prepare beforehand to discuss during the group time together. The Head, Heart, and Hands questions help you apply what you have learned. Use the margins for whatever notes you might need to jot down.

3) AS A LEADER GUIDE

TRAILBLAZER CONNECTION AND WISDOM

Readers of the Commentary will find the most of these often not just in the Commentary, but in the Bible itself. As you read, look for the words of the Lord, the words of the prophets, and the words of the apostles. The words of the Lord are the words of the Lord, the words of the prophets are the words of the prophets, and the words of the apostles are the words of the apostles. The words of the Lord are the words of the Lord, the words of the prophets are the words of the prophets, and the words of the apostles are the words of the apostles.

child Jesus (Matt. 2:1-12). Perhaps Daniel's ministry led to these events when recognizing the signs of the Messiah's birth. The term "messiah" focuses especially on those who could not see the signs and were incapable of discerning the will of the gods. These officials were unable to interpret Nebuchadnezzar's dream in chapter 2 and 4, but Daniel was able to do so by God's wisdom.

The chapter's concluding statement that "Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus" (6:23) reveals the length of Daniel's ministry. Cyrus captured Babylon in 539 BC, almost seventy years after Daniel came to Babylon as a exile. God blessed the faithful servant with a long life of earthly service. We read more about the faithfulness of Hananiah, Michael, and Azariah in chapter 3, but we don't know the extent of his ministry past that.

God often uses little victories in our lives to prepare us for bigger ones. Likewise, He rewards our challenges by giving us greater opportunities to trust Him. The book of Daniel is a whole that shows how God enabled His servants to bring glory to Him before mighty kings. Comparatively speaking, this was a small act of obedience, but it laid a mighty foundation for the greater things God would do in those men's lives as He displayed His power and glory through them.

God calls us to obey His commands. As we do, we will learn the wisdom of the commands, and we will learn to trust Him more quickly and more completely as we go through life. God also will use our acts of obedience to point others to Him. People will be drawn to Him as they see our love and hear our corresponding words. Less mature Christians also may be encouraged to trust God more as they see our faith.

Key Concept: Obedience to God leads to greater wisdom from God.

As you reflect on Daniel 1, ask the Lord to give you an obedient heart. Ask Him to use you for His purpose, just as He used Daniel, Hananiah, Michael, and Azariah. Finally, ask Him to help others see God's light in you so they will know their spiritual darkness and turn to Jesus (Matt. 5:14-16).

How can our obedience show right on God's glory for others to see?

HEAD

How does the book of the Lord relate to our obedience to the Lord?

HEART

Under what circumstances do you find it most difficult to obey the Lord, and how can you prepare yourself for those times?

HANDS

How will you determine to obey the Lord as He gains the glory through your actions?

the Commentary as a leader guide. For the best learning experience, having the Leader Guide along with the Commentary will be beneficial as the Leader Guide has a guided path to lead the group time, a group activity to foster discussion and group interaction, and further details about the Head, Heart, and Hands application section.

But if you choose not to use the Leader Guide, you can use the Commentary as a leader guide by following the pages in order with your group, highlighting important ideas and concepts along with the headings and subheadings to add further insight to the key concept. Ask your group what was interesting to them, and use the questions provided to further your group discussion. And as you wrap up with the Head, Heart, and Hands questions, allow the group to discuss how to apply what they've learned. End with prayer requests and praises that you can jot down in the margins.

If your group chooses to use the Commentary as their personal study guide, then you as the leader can also use

THE GOSPEL PROJECT

UNIT 16

GOD IN THE EXILE



DANIEL



MEMORY VERSES

“I continued watching in the night visions, and suddenly one like a son of man was coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was escorted before him. He was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, so that those of every people, nation, and language should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will not be destroyed.”

—Daniel 7:13-14



OBEDIENCE

CORE PASSAGE: DANIEL 1:8-21

Context: In 605 BC, a few short years into King Jehoiakim's reign over Judah, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar took control of Jerusalem, made Judah's king his vassal, and carried off some high-profile young men as exiles to Babylon. Among these were Daniel, Haniah, Mishael, and Azariah. They were brought to the palace to be educated in Babylonian ways so they could serve their new king. For three years they were trained in all things Babylonian—language, customs, and religion—and faced the temptation of losing their identity as God's people.

Key Concept: Obedience to God leads to greater wisdom from God.

DAILY READINGS

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 1: Daniel 1:1-7 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 4: Daniel 2:14-24 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 2: Daniel 1:8-21 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 5: Daniel 2:25-49 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 3: Daniel 2:1-13 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 6: Psalm 112 |

Pursuing obedience to God is always right despite the obstacles (Daniel 1:8-14).

⁸ Daniel determined that he would not defile himself with the king's food or with the wine he drank. So he asked permission from the chief eunuch not to defile himself. ⁹ God had granted Daniel kindness and compassion from the chief eunuch, ¹⁰ yet he said to Daniel, "I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and drink. What if he sees your faces looking thinner than the other young men your age? You would endanger my life with the king." ¹¹ So Daniel said to the guard whom the chief eunuch had assigned to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, ¹² "Please test your servants for ten days. Let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. ¹³ Then examine our appearance and the appearance of the young men who are eating the king's food, and deal with your servants based on what you see." ¹⁴ He agreed with them about this and tested them for ten days.

Obedient Hearts Resist Compromise

In 605 BC, the Lord gave Jerusalem into the hands of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon (605–562 BC). God's judgment came because of the kingdom of Judah's persistent unfaithfulness toward God and the terms of His covenant. Nebuchadnezzar took many sacred vessels from Jerusalem's temple to Babylon with him (vv. 1-2). He also commanded the Judean court's best and brightest youths be brought to the palace at Babylon to be trained for three years in the literature and language of the Chaldeans in order to serve the king (vv. 3-5). Among these captives were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, the latter three being



Scan this QR code to access this session's Scripture passages.

Notes

WORD Study

DETERMINED:

In Daniel 1:8, the Hebrew phrase translated “determined” literally reads “set it on his heart.” Obedience requires determining to follow God no matter the cost. It is vital to remember that in the Christian life, our determination to obey flows from our justification in Christ by faith, not toward it. Because we are saved and have the Holy Spirit, we are able to desire and to determine to obey the God who loves us and gave His Son for us.

more popularly known by the names given to them by their Babylonian captors: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (vv. 6-7).

Daniel and his three friends likely felt like anything but slaves. They were far from their homeland, but Nebuchadnezzar had commanded that they receive the best of everything. Nevertheless, as they wrestled with how to obey God’s commands in a pagan culture, they realized that what initially seemed like a blessing might someday cost them dearly.

Verse 8 constitutes a turning point in the narrative: “Daniel determined [literally ‘set it on his heart’] that he would not defile himself with the king’s food or with the wine he drank.” The text suggests Daniel took the lead on this decision, though verses 12-13 affirm that his friends agreed with him.

The Law of Moses required certain dietary restrictions (Lev. 11). Only certain animals could be eaten, and others were prohibited. The Jewish exiles had no control over what food they received in Babylon and thus faced the possibility of compromising their commitment to God. Furthermore, the Babylonians also sacrificed a portion of their food and drink to the Babylonian gods, an idolatrous practice of which Daniel and his friends wanted no part.¹

The Law of Moses did not specifically prohibit the use of wine, but perhaps Daniel and his friends decided to remain in full control of their senses during this time. They determined to obey God’s commands if at all possible. But would their God make it possible for them to obey His laws when those laws potentially contradicted the order of Babylon’s king?

Life also brings us challenges in which we must choose to obey God when spiritual compromise

threatens. These can come through situations that arise in our families, on the job, in our neighborhood, or elsewhere. Such challenges are not unusual; rather, they constitute part of the Christian life.

An officer with the title “chief eunuch” oversaw the care of Daniel, his friends, and the other trainees. The comment in verse 9 that “God had granted Daniel kindness and compassion from the chief eunuch” provides readers a sense of hope that perhaps this official would honor Daniel’s request. The word translated “kindness” is the Hebrew word *hesed*, which occurs over one hundred and fifty times in the Old Testament. It also can be translated “grace,” “favor,” “loyalty,” and “covenant love.” It often denotes the unmatched faithful love God has for His people (Ps. 136:1ff, “faithful love”). Here the CSB rendering of “kindness” makes sense; perhaps the chief eunuch recognized the young men were far from home and so treated them with compassion.

Nevertheless, the official faced a difficult choice, which he highlighted for Daniel and his friends: “I fear my lord the king” (v. 10). Since the king had commanded that Daniel and his friends receive the palace’s choice food and drink, the official wanted to make sure the young men did not look thinner or more haggard than the other trainees. The king might inquire why they looked as they did, and he might not take kindly to news that his officer had allowed the Jewish young men to choose their own diet! Therefore, the chief eunuch was torn between helping the Jewish exiles honor their commitment to God and obeying the orders Nebuchadnezzar had given him.

We also will face potential compromises in our spiritual journey. Indeed, recognizing these challenges

Voices from THE CHURCH

“[Daniel] realized that for the child of God some things cannot be negotiated or compromised. . . . Instead, from the beginning, in what to others seemed a trivial matter, he nailed his colors to the mast. In doing so, he gained a bridgehead into enemy-occupied territory and found himself increasingly strong in the Lord.”²

—Sinclair Ferguson

constitutes part of obedience, because the situation requires us to choose obedience over compromise. Obstacles may arise, but we still need to choose obedience—we show our faith through obeying God’s Word (Jas. 2:14-26). Daniel knew this, so he determined to press the issue when the official expressed hesitation to fulfill his request.

How have you felt the riskiness of obedience to God in this world?

Obedient Hearts Persist Despite Obstacles

The chief eunuch, who supervised all the youths in training for the king’s service, had reservations about granting Daniel’s request (Dan. 1:10). He didn’t reject it outright, but he expressed his personal concern. Rather than giving up, Daniel now turned to the guard whom the chief eunuch had assigned to tend them (v. 11). Perhaps God would provide a way for them to obey His commands without bringing trouble on either them or the Chaldean officials. Daniel certainly didn’t want to cause a problem, though he did want to persist in his attempt to find a way to honor God’s commands above all.

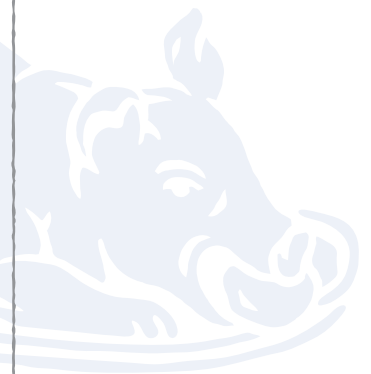
The life of faith will bring challenges to our lives along with obstacles to our obedience. We then have to ask ourselves how we can find a new path to obedience. This is not to say that we can redefine what obedience looks like. Rather, in such cases, the depth of our faith is revealed by the depth of our efforts to obey. What we truly believe becomes clear in what we do.

Daniel suggested the guard allow a simple ten-day test for him and his three friends. They would eat only vegetables and drink only water during the ten-day

period, while the other youths in training would eat the king's choice food and drink his wine. Eating only vegetables and drinking only water would limit their diet but would allow them to obey the Jewish dietary laws. At the same time, the other youths in training who continued to enjoy the best of the king's food and wine would provide a basis for comparison. Daniel proposed that when the ten days were complete, the guard would compare them with the other young men who had eaten the king's best. He then could determine for himself whether any cause for concern existed over his allowance for these four Jewish exiles.

Daniel's persistence came from a strong faith, and so must ours. The Bible assures us that good works or obedience do not save us—we are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus (Eph. 2:8-9). At the same time, genuine faith naturally expresses itself in good works in obedience to God's commands (Eph. 2:10). Faith that doesn't express itself in action is at best suspect and at worst dead (Jas. 2:26). Obedience is the best evidence of our faithful commitment to the Lord. The old adage "actions speak louder than words" holds true; no matter what we say we believe, what we actually do visibly demonstrates what we believe.

Daniel's suggestion that the official could "deal with your servants based on what you see" (Dan. 1:13) reflected his faith that God would honor their obedience. The guard agreed with them and "tested them for ten days" (v. 14). God thus gave Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah favor with the guard just as He had given them favor with the chief eunuch (v. 9). Daniel and his friends demonstrated their faith by requesting this exemption, determined to obey God despite the obstacles.



GOSPEL Connection

Our obedience to God comes from faith in His character and works. He has always been faithful, even in suffering. Christ obeyed the Father through suffering. And from His example, our obedience to Christ demonstrates our faith in Him.

Daniel's proposal provides an example for believers today. We also need to act in faith, even as we trust God to bring about a way for us to obey His commands. The Lord will bless our faithfulness, and our obedience will visibly demonstrate our faith to others. God's Word also assures us that He will give us grace to withstand temptation and to trust God to provide a means of escape (1 Cor. 10:13). In both instances, our experience will build our faith and lead us to trust God in greater challenges.

How can God get the glory from our obedience, whether the outcome is positive or negative?

When we obey God, knowledge and wisdom increase (Daniel 1:15-21).

¹⁵ At the end of ten days they looked better and healthier than all the young men who were eating the king's food. ¹⁶ So the guard continued to remove their food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables. ¹⁷ God gave these four young men knowledge and understanding in every kind of literature and wisdom. Daniel also understood visions and dreams of every kind. ¹⁸ At the end of the time that the king had said to present them, the chief eunuch presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. ¹⁹ The king interviewed them, and among all of them, no one was found equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. So they began to attend the king. ²⁰ In every matter of wisdom and understanding that the king consulted them about, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and mediums in his entire kingdom. ²¹ Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.

Faithful Obedience Increases Wisdom

The ten-day test period Daniel had proposed produced the desired results. He and his friends had a superior appearance to “all the young men who were eating the king’s food” (v. 15). Interestingly, the expression translated “healthier” literally means “fatter of flesh.” To put it another way, Daniel and his friends didn’t look equal to the others; they looked better than the others! God determined to bless His followers as they trusted Him to overcome the obstacles they faced. We also must assume the Chaldean guard saw God’s power in this outcome.

Sometimes Christians may feel hesitant to exercise this kind of faith, but the Bible assures us God is able to do far beyond anything we ask or think (Eph. 3:20). We may foolishly assume that because we can’t think of a good solution that God can’t either. However, His Word assures us that God is working everything in our lives for our good and for His glory (Rom. 8:28). Such work includes providing situations in which we can follow His commands. He delights in aiding His children who are determined to follow His will.

Interpreters disagree over the exact meaning of verse 16. Some believe the language merely affirms the guard continued to give the men vegetables and water in place of the king’s food and wine. Others have argued that the language suggests the guard made a small profit by keeping back the king’s food and wine and substituting vegetables.³

At any rate, once Daniel and his friends had demonstrated the possibility of being more healthy than the others who ate the king’s food and wine, the guard saw no reason to force them to eat the king’s food. In

this way, God blessed His faithful servants for their obedience to His commands and even caused them to appear healthier than their fellow trainees who were enjoying the king's food and wine.

Yet God's blessing to these four Jewish exiles exceeded merely keeping them healthy. He also gave to Daniel and his friends "knowledge and understanding" (v. 17) beyond what they had possessed before. The word translated "knowledge" designates the youths' grasp of a large amount of content; they were able to learn much about their new land and its history. The word translated "understanding" denotes special insight beyond what others might possess. This knowledge and understanding extended to "every kind of literature" they studied as they became more familiar with Chaldean culture (v. 17; cf. v. 4). God also gave them wisdom, the ability to apply appropriately the knowledge they had to any given situation. The details of this passage affirm what King Solomon wrote in Proverbs 2:6: "The LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding." Daniel and his friends received all three gifts when they determined to obey God's commands despite the potential cost, and they used those gifts to advance God's purposes.

Verse 17 concludes with the singular observation that "Daniel also understood visions and dreams of every kind." This chapter contains nothing more about this God-given ability, but later chapters of the book describe Daniel's use of his gift for God's glory in interpreting Nebuchadnezzar's dreams (Dan. 2; 4) and interpreting for King Belshazzar the mysterious handwriting on the wall (Dan. 5). Chapters 7–12 describe four visions of the future that Daniel saw. In each case,

Daniel credited God for the dreams and their interpretations and the visions he received; he was merely an ordinary person in the hands of an extraordinary God.

How does obedience help cultivate wisdom in the Christian life?

Faithful Obedience Helps Others See God

At “the end of the time that the king had said to present them” (1:18), the chief eunuch now brought his recruits before Nebuchadnezzar. We can only imagine what emotions these young men were experiencing. Would the king be impressed? Would he like their answers? If he were displeased, what would happen to them?

Nebuchadnezzar’s interview of the trainees confirmed the surpassing wisdom of these four men in particular, as Daniel 1:19 asserts: “No one was found equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishaël, and Azariah.” That Nebuchadnezzar spoke to the young men about “every matter of wisdom and understanding” (v. 20) suggests he interviewed them thoroughly. The more Nebuchadnezzar learned about them, the more he would learn about their God.

The king also determined that Daniel and his three friends were “ten times better than all the magicians and mediums in his entire kingdom” (v. 20). Not only did they distinguish themselves among their fellow trainees, they were wiser and had more insight than those already in Nebuchadnezzar’s court! The term “magicians” describes court officials who specialized in astrology; they observed the stars to discern the will of the gods and also performed healings and exorcisms. Some interpreters have suggested a possible connection with the magi (wise men) who visited the

Notes



Bonus Content

Scan this QR code to see that God positioned Daniel among the wise men of Babylon, leading to the wise men’s arrival in Bethlehem hundreds of years later.

THEOLOGY Connection

JUSTIFICATION AND WORKS:

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

child Jesus (Matt. 2:1-12). Perhaps Daniel's ministry led to these eastern wise men recognizing the signs of the Messiah's birth. The term "mediums" focuses especially on those who could recite spells and perform incantations to discern the will of the gods.⁴ These officials were unable to interpret Nebuchadnezzar's dreams in chapters 2 and 4, but Daniel was able to do so by God's wisdom.

The chapter's concluding statement that "Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus" (v. 21) reveals the length of Daniel's ministry. Cyrus conquered Babylon in 539 BC, almost seventy years after Daniel came to Babylon as an exile. God blessed His faithful servant with a long life of earthly service. We read more about the faithfulness of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah in chapter 3, but we don't know the extent of their ministry past that.

God often uses little victories in our lives to prepare us for bigger ones. Likewise, He rewards our obedience by giving us greater opportunities to trust Him. The book of Daniel as a whole describes how God enabled His servants to bring glory to Him before mighty kings. Comparatively speaking, this was a small act of obedience, but it laid a mighty foundation for the greater things God would do in these men's lives as He displayed His power and glory through them.

God calls us to obey His commands. As we do, we will learn firsthand the wisdom of His commands, and we will learn to trust Him more quickly and more completely as we go through life. God also will use our acts of obedience to point others to Him. People will be drawn to Him as they see our lives and hear our corresponding words. Less mature Christians also may be encouraged to trust God more as they see our faith.

As you reflect on Daniel 1, ask the Lord to give you an obedient heart. Ask Him to use you for His purposes, just as He used Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Finally, ask Him to help others see God's light in you so they will leave their spiritual darkness and turn to Jesus (Matt. 5:14-16).

How can our obedience shine a light on God's glory for others to see?



HEAD

How does the fear of the Lord relate to our obedience to the Lord?



HEART

Under what circumstances do you find it most difficult to obey the Lord, and how can you prepare yourself for those times?



HANDS

How will you determine to obey the Lord so He gets the glory through your actions?

References

1. Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel*, vol. 18, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 66.
2. Sinclair B. Ferguson and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *Daniel*, vol. 21, The Preacher's Commentary Series (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1988), 34.
3. Joyce G. Baldwin, *Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 23, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 92.
4. Miller, 72-73.

COURAGE

CORE PASSAGE: DANIEL 3:14-18,24-29

Context: After three years of Babylonian training, Daniel and his friends served the king as advisers. One night, the king had a disturbing dream, and only Daniel, blessed with God's gift to interpret dreams, was able to answer the king about its meaning. That dream included a multi-layered statue and foretold the rise and fall of nations, beginning with Babylon, whose king was represented by the statue's golden head. Nebuchadnezzar later decided to build an enormous statue made entirely of gold and to have all of his subjects bow in worship to it. Daniel's friends, however, chose to remain faithful and to worship the Lord alone.

Key Concept: God is worthy of our trust and obedience, even if the result is death.

DAILY READINGS

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 1: Daniel 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 4: Ezekiel 40–44 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 2: Daniel 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 5: Ezekiel 45–48 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 3: Obadiah | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 6: Psalm 14 |

God is always able to save (Daniel 3:14-18).

¹⁴ Nebuchadnezzar asked them, “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, is it true that you don’t serve my gods or worship the gold statue I have set up? ¹⁵ Now if you’re ready, when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, drum, and every kind of music, fall down and worship the statue I made. But if you don’t worship it, you will immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire—and who is the god who can rescue you from my power?” ¹⁶ Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego replied to the king, “Nebuchadnezzar, we don’t need to give you an answer to this question. ¹⁷ If the God we serve exists, then he can rescue us from the furnace of blazing fire, and he can rescue us from the power of you, the king. ¹⁸ But even if he does not rescue us, we want you as king to know that we will not serve your gods or worship the gold statue you set up.”

The Three Friends Resisted Idols

Daniel 1 records how the Lord blessed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (formerly Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, 1:6-7) and gave them favor in the eyes of Babylon’s king (1:11-15, 18-20). Daniel 2 recounts Daniel’s interpreting Nebuchadnezzar’s dream that no one else could interpret (2:26-45), saving the lives of the wise men of Babylon, including himself and his friends. As a result, the king promoted Daniel over the entire province of Babylon, and Daniel appointed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to manage the province while Daniel served the king at the palace (2:49). These men enjoyed great blessing as Judean exiles. Nevertheless, they may have wondered whether one day they would have to make a stand to honor God



Scan this QR code to access this session's Scripture passages.

Notes

over the king. Daniel 3 records the dramatic moment when they chose to serve God in the face of potential punishment or death.

When Daniel interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's dream about a large statue with a gold head (2:38), Daniel's words may have unintentionally prompted Nebuchadnezzar to set up a statue of gold on the plain of Dura, a district "in the province of Babylon" (3:1).¹ The king commanded that all his leading officials bow down to the golden image he had built (3:4-6).

In a polytheistic society such as Babylon that worshiped hundreds of gods, perhaps the people concluded that worshiping one more was not a big deal. However, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego knew they could not bow before an idol (Ex. 20:3-6). News of their refusal reached their opponents, who promptly accused them before Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 3:8-12). Indeed, what they said about the three Jewish men was true: "They do not serve your gods or worship the gold statue you have set up" (v. 12). The king, angry at their disobedience, summoned them.

Nebuchadnezzar's opening question provided them an opportunity to speak for themselves (v. 14). Perhaps he suspected those who accused them were jealous of their position over the province of Babylon despite their Jewish identity. Perhaps they had become trusted officials, and he did not want to order their deaths. At any rate, Nebuchadnezzar would spare the men if they would bow before the statue.

The words "you don't serve my gods or worship the gold statue" identified the heart of the issue. The word translated "serve" always refers to service of a god or the God in the book of Daniel (3:12,14,17,18,28; 6:20; 7:14,27). By admitting to this part of the charge,

the Jewish men affirmed they did not share the king's worldview nor the general worldview of Babylon's population. Certainly the Babylonian conquerors were aware of Jewish spiritual distinctives. However, if these men did not bow before the gold statue, they would be violating the king's direct order. Furthermore, their defiant disobedience would be quite public, and other officials would take note. Babylon's king would not have wanted his leading officials to obey or to disobey his commands as they thought best.

Nebuchadnezzar gave Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego the opportunity to obey publicly at that moment. He was willing to set aside whatever disobedience might have occurred if the men were ready to bow before his gold image; however, he warned them that disobedience would bring dire consequences: being thrown into a furnace of blazing fire. He then followed with a question: "Who is the god who can rescue you from my power?" (v. 15).

Life often brings Jesus-followers opportunities to take a stand for their faith. In some parts of the world, believers face severe penalties and punishments. Whatever the consequences, however, God expects us to worship and serve Him alone. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were commanded to renounce publicly their absolute allegiance to the one true God. Today's believers must remember that our relationship with God is more than the most important thing in life. It is life itself, and everything else flows from that relationship (Deut. 30:20; John 17:3). We need to ask God for the courage to stand for Him.

What are some ways believers today experience difficulties and persecution for their faith?

Godly ATTRIBUTE

COURAGE:

Courage is not just an attitude; it is a display. True courage is only displayed on the battlefields of life, but it is not born there. Courage is born from regular, everyday moments of reality with God as we grow in faith and learn how to live from His Word. God is always preparing us for greater displays of courage that will bring Him glory, and He has given us His Spirit to supply us with the strength we need for the moment.

The Three Friends Resisted the King

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego replied to the king knowing their next words could be their last (Dan. 3:16). Nebuchadnezzar had already warned them of the consequences of their disobedience. We may assume a host of officials stood by to witness what would happen next (vv. 8-12).

The three men's words "we don't need to give you an answer to this question" reference Nebuchadnezzar's question to them in verse 15. The king certainly had intended the question as rhetorical, that is, it really was more of a statement than a question. *No god*—so the king thought—*could rescue Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from my power*. However, these three men of God courageously answered the king's question. They had made up their minds to obey God, but they wanted the king to know that someone greater than he actually controlled the outcome. They would testify about their God, regardless of how their God responded to their situation.

The men's words "if the God we serve exists" (v. 17) has the sense of "if the God we serve exists—and we are confident He does." They were standing on their faith in a God they knew continued to guide their steps. In light of that confidence, they assured Nebuchadnezzar of two things. First, they said that God "can rescue us from the furnace of blazing fire." He could, if He so chose, deliver them from any death decree the king might bring. Second, they affirmed that God "can rescue us from the power of you, the king." The king had declared no one could rescue them from his power (v. 15), but these three Jewish men were determined to set the record straight, even if it meant their death.



Verse 18 records the final decision Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego affirmed before Nebuchadnezzar. The words “even if he does not rescue us” acknowledged they had no certainty that God would intervene and save them. God might do that or He might not. Either way, these three men knew they must worship God and God alone. They could not bow to the golden statue or any other pagan image, and they knew they could trust God whether in life or in death. Therefore, they asserted, “We want you as king to know we will not serve your gods or worship the gold statue you have set up.” They repeated the king’s question from verse 14 verbatim. They stood on their conviction that the Lord was the one true God, and they would worship Him alone.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego faced a clear choice: choose idolatry and live or choose the Lord alone and die. They knew that the first two commands of the Ten Commandments called them to worship God alone and to avoid all forms of idolatry. They could not obey the king’s decree, whatever the cost.

Throughout history, many of God’s people have had to make such life-or-death decisions. The prophet Elijah faced possible death from wicked Queen Jezebel when he alone stood as a prophet of the Lord against 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:17-19,22; 19:1-2). He remained faithful to God, and God protected him. Jewish tradition claims that Isaiah the prophet was martyred under evil King Manasseh, who sawed him in half (cf. Heb. 11:37).² Jeremiah the prophet also faced persecution from Judah’s leaders (Jer. 20:1-6). Even after Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar, many blamed Jeremiah for their troubles and persisted in their idolatry (44:15-19).

**Voices from
CHURCH HISTORY**

*“Let faith be yours,
and God will
be with you in
your trouble.”³*

—Augustine of
Hippo (c. 354–430)

During the first century as the church grew, Christians faced imprisonment or martyrdom because they refused to affirm that Caesar was Lord. Only the Lord Jesus deserved that title, and they were willing to face suffering or even death for their conviction. The apostle Paul died for his faith at the command of the Roman emperor Nero around AD 64. Yet as the historian T. R. Glover stated, “The day would come when men would call their dogs Nero and their sons Paul.”⁴

How can we become people who exhibit faith and courage even in the face of death?

God saves so that all would know He is the Most High God (Daniel 3:24-29).

²⁴ Then King Nebuchadnezzar jumped up in alarm. He said to his advisers, “Didn’t we throw three men, bound, into the fire?” “Yes, of course, Your Majesty,” they replied to the king. ²⁵ He exclaimed, “Look! I see four men, not tied, walking around in the fire unharmed; and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.” ²⁶ Nebuchadnezzar then approached the door of the furnace of blazing fire and called, “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, you servants of the Most High God—come out!” So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out of the fire. ²⁷ When the satraps, prefects, governors, and the king’s advisers gathered around, they saw that the fire had no effect on the bodies of these men: not a hair of their heads was singed, their robes were unaffected, and there was no smell of fire on them. ²⁸ Nebuchadnezzar exclaimed, “Praise to the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego! He sent his angel and rescued his servants who trusted in him. They violated the king’s command and risked their lives rather than serve or worship any god

except their own God.²⁹ Therefore I issue a decree that anyone of any people, nation, or language who says anything offensive against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego will be torn limb from limb and his house made a garbage dump. For there is no other god who is able to deliver like this.”

God Saves to Reveal His Power

King Nebuchadnezzar was enraged at their response (v. 19). He ordered his best soldiers to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and to throw them into the furnace (vv. 20-21). Ironically, the fire’s intensity resulted in the deaths of the men who threw Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego into the fire (v. 22). As the three men fell into the flames, the king of Babylon assumed he had destroyed those who had dared oppose him. However, he was about to learn an astounding lesson about the power of God.

Suddenly, Nebuchadnezzar jumped up in alarm (v. 24), though the text does not reveal what he saw until the next verse. The word translated “alarm” occurs several times in the book of Daniel. It describes the alarm Nebuchadnezzar experienced over his dream (translated “frightened” [4:5]). It also denotes the alarm Belshazzar, a successor of Nebuchadnezzar, experienced when he saw a disembodied hand writing on the wall of his palace (“terrified” [5:6,9]). Interestingly, the word also denotes Daniel’s alarm when he experienced a vision from God (“terrified” [7:15,28]). God’s power can be both amazing and terrifying.

The king raised a question to his advisors, but he already knew the answer: “‘Didn’t we throw three men, bound, into the fire?’ ‘Yes, of course, Your Majesty,’ they replied to the king” (3:24), confirming what he

THEOLOGY Connection

MIRACLES: A miracle is an event in which God makes an exception to the natural order or supersedes natural laws for the purpose of demonstrating His glory and/or validating His message. Miracles are recorded throughout Scripture; signs and wonders were oftentimes evident when a prophet or an apostle was speaking God's message to the people. Because we believe God to be all-powerful and personally involved in this world, we believe He can and does perform miracles.

knew to be true. He had commanded the men's death, and he had witnessed his soldiers throwing Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego into the flames. However, he was totally unprepared for what he saw next.

Nebuchadnezzar saw "four men, not tied, walking around in the fire unharmed" (v. 25). The king was witnessing a miracle. When the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, God brought plagues upon the land to demonstrate His power (see Ex. 7–12). He also parted the waters of the sea so His people could cross on dry ground and then closed the waters on the Egyptian army as it pursued them (14:21-31). God sent fire from heaven to consume the prophet Elijah's sacrifice on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:38-39). He thereby showed His glory and validated the truth of Elijah's message, namely, that the Lord was God in Israel, not Baal. The ultimate miracle of the Bible was when God raised Jesus from the dead (Matt. 28:1-10). Because God is all-powerful and active in His world, He can and sometimes does perform miracles.

The king saw Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego walking in the fire unharmed, but who was the fourth individual? Nebuchadnezzar exclaimed, "The fourth looks like a son of the gods" (Dan. 3:25). Clearly this being was not a mortal creature, for no human being could shelter these men from the terrible flames. Some interpreters have suggested this was a theophany—an appearance of the Son of God in a pre-incarnate form⁵—by pointing to other Old Testament passages that may refer to the Second Person of the Trinity (Gen. 14:18-20; cf. Heb. 7:1-3, and Dan. 10:5-6; cf. Rev. 1:13-16). We cannot be sure if this was a theophany or an angel, but the text is clear that God miraculously intervened to save His faithful servants.

The king “approached the door of the furnace” (Dan. 3:26) whose flames had killed those who threw in Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Nebuchadnezzar addressed the living men as “servants of the Most High God.” He clearly was in awe of their God’s power to rescue them! The king’s anger at their refusal to obey disappeared as he witnessed God’s miraculous work.

The “satraps, prefects, governors, and the king’s advisors” (v. 27) also witnessed God’s saving power. These significant leaders in Nebuchadnezzar’s kingdom were present at the golden image’s dedication and had bowed before it along with the others (vv. 3,7). The king’s advisers provided counsel at the king’s request. What they saw astounded them: “the fire had no effect on the bodies of these men.” The men appeared and smelled as if they had never even been near the furnace! The restraints Nebuchadnezzar’s soldiers had put on them were gone, but Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had suffered absolutely no effect in the furnace.

Why do you think God gave Nebuchadnezzar the ability to see “the fourth man” in the fire?

God Saves to Receive Glory

What the king had just witnessed called for action. Nebuchadnezzar naturally assumed that God might be angry with him for throwing His servants into a fire. Consequently, the king now exclaimed, “Praise to the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego!” (v. 28). The king mentioned the “angel” or messenger their God sent to rescue them. He also described Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego as God’s “servants who trusted in him.”

**GOSPEL
Connection**

God's power saved Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fire, and that same power resurrected Jesus Christ. Even in dire circumstances, God makes a way to accomplish His will, as seen ultimately in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

To be sure, the three Jewish men had violated the king's command and risked their lives by doing so. However, the king changed his perspective when he witnessed God's saving miracle. He recognized that the men had not disobeyed him out of a lack of respect. Rather, they knew they could not "serve or worship any god except their own God" (v. 28). Nebuchadnezzar had asked them, "Who is the god who can rescue you from my power?" (v. 15). He now knew the answer to his own question: It was the God whom Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego faithfully served!

After giving praise to God, Nebuchadnezzar issued a decree that applied to "anyone of any people, nation, or language" (v. 29). The king did not insist that the people stop worshiping their own gods. However, he did prohibit them from saying "anything offensive" against "the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego." The penalty to anyone who spoke anything offensive against the Lord would be that the individual would be "torn limb from limb and his house made a garbage dump" (v. 29). This punishment closely parallels the threat Nebuchadnezzar uttered against his officials if they didn't tell him his earlier dream and interpret it (2:5). Public dismemberment and turning houses into garbage dumps would create a visible deterrent. No one would want to share such a fate! Nebuchadnezzar then professed the reason for his counter decree: "There is no other God who is able to deliver like this" (3:29). The king had never witnessed such power, and he knew he had better respect it.

The God who rescued Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the furnace, the God who saved them from the fire, is the same God who raised Jesus from the dead. No matter how dire the circumstances, God

makes a way to accomplish His will, and the ultimate example of this hope is the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God's Son. The New Testament assures us that the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead now dwells in us believers to empower us to accomplish God's purposes (Rom. 8:11). God is worthy of our trust and obedience, no matter what the result.

How have you seen the power of God at work in your life?



HEAD

Why is it important that we believe the miracles in the Bible?



HEART

What in your life keeps you from trusting God and obeying with courage?



HANDS

How will you act with faith and courage this week, trusting the Lord for direction, words, and boldness?

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4. T. R. Glover, quoted in F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 7.
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FAITHFULNESS

CORE PASSAGE: DANIEL 6:13-24

Context: In the waning years of Nebuchadnezzar's rule, the Lord humbled him for seven years and then restored him to his throne, for which the king praised the Lord as "the King of the heavens" (Dan. 4:37). But the king's descendant failed to learn this lesson. On a night of revelry, Belshazzar defiled the gold vessels taken from the Lord's temple. He then observed mysterious fingers writing on the wall, which Daniel interpreted as God's coming judgment upon the king. That very night, Belshazzar was killed, and Babylon was conquered by Darius (Cyrus) of the Medo-Persian Empire. Daniel then served Darius as an administrator of the kingdom.

Key Concept: We honor God when we live in faith and trust God in all situations.

DAILY READINGS

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 1: 2 Kings 25:27-30 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 4: Daniel 6:1-18 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 2: Jeremiah 52:31-34 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 5: Daniel 6:19-28 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 3: Daniel 5:1-31 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 6: Psalm 91 |

Faithfulness includes living out our faith when persecuted (Daniel 6:13-18).

¹³ Then they replied to the king, “Daniel, one of the Judean exiles, has ignored you, the king, and the edict you signed, for he prays three times a day.” ¹⁴ As soon as the king heard this, he was very displeased; he set his mind on rescuing Daniel and made every effort until sundown to deliver him. ¹⁵ Then these men went together to the king and said to him, “You know, Your Majesty, that it is a law of the Medes and Persians that no edict or ordinance the king establishes can be changed.” ¹⁶ So the king gave the order, and they brought Daniel and threw him into the lions’ den. The king said to Daniel, “May your God, whom you continually serve, rescue you!” ¹⁷ A stone was brought and placed over the mouth of the den. The king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the signet rings of his nobles, so that nothing in regard to Daniel could be changed. ¹⁸ Then the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting. No diversions were brought to him, and he could not sleep.

Faithfulness May Incur Persecution

In 539 BC, the kingdom of Medo-Persia conquered Babylon. King Belshazzar, Babylon’s last king, was killed (5:30), and Persia became the dominant world empire. Daniel, who was originally brought from Jerusalem to Babylon in 605 BC by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, now served in the Persian administration at the approximate age of 80.

Scholars have disagreed over the identity of King Darius in Daniel 5–6, since many historical records confirm that King Cyrus conquered Babylon. Some have proposed Darius was an alternate name for



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Notes

GOSPEL Connection

Following God and being a believer in Jesus Christ can come with persecution in our world. Yet we continue to live in faith because He is with us and has saved us. We don't fear death because He has resurrection power, whereas those without Christ will suffer an eternal death.

Gubaru, one of Cyrus's leading generals. Against this view, a general would not likely have issued such a sweeping decree as the text says Darius did (6:6-9). Other scholars support the identification of Darius with Cyrus, Persia's first king, so that Darius the Mede (5:31) is King Cyrus of Persia (1:21; Ezra 1:1). This view seems more likely for a number of reasons, including:

- the dual nature of the empire as Medo-Persia warranting dual titles for the king, and
- Cyrus's historical age conforms to the biblical data of Darius's receiving the kingdom at the age of 62 (Dan. 5:31).¹

Many Persian officials were jealous of Daniel's prominence in the administration, but they could not find any fault in the way he handled his kingdom responsibilities (6:4). They did notice, however, that Daniel prayed to his God three times a day, so they contrived a scheme by which they might trap him. The leaders went to Darius and convinced him to establish an ordinance for thirty days that no one could petition any god or man except the king. Anyone who did so would be thrown into a lions' den (6:6-9).

When Daniel, with full knowledge of the decree, continued faithfully praying to his God, his accusers saw him and reported him to Darius. Their identification of him as "Daniel, one of the Judean exiles" (6:13) would have immediately made the connection in the king's mind. They also highlighted his foreign status, as the accusers of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had done with them (3:12). The accusers likely thought a foreigner should not occupy such a high position in the Persian administration.

The expression translated "has ignored you" literally means "has not shown you the proper deference."

They implied Daniel should have respected Darius enough to honor his edict,² but Daniel's accusers affirmed, "He prays three times a day."

The words "as soon as the king heard this, he was very displeased" (6:14) highlight Darius's predicament. The king probably realized his officials had used his own vanity to trap Daniel, and he was displeased with himself over this. He also was sorrowful in that he valued Daniel and did not want to order his death. Consequently, the king "set his mind on rescuing Daniel" (recall Daniel's "determination," or "setting his heart," on not defiling himself with the king's food in Dan. 1:8). Presumably Darius considered what loophole would allow him to make an exception in Daniel's case. The text's comment that the king "made every effort until sundown to deliver him" stresses the king's grave concern.

The words "these men" (6:15) refer to the administrators and satraps mentioned in verse 6. They had sought to find fault with Daniel's administrative practices and could not do so, but now they had trapped him because of his faith and the king's misguided decree. They now wanted to ensure the king did not try to make an exception for Daniel.

By Persian custom, "a law of the Medes and the Persians" could not be changed once adopted. Perhaps the Persians had established this custom because making any decree permanent and binding on everyone would not allow a king to play favorites or to impose law arbitrarily. However, in this case, some of Darius's closest officials had tricked him into establishing a decree that would bring the death of his most trusted administrator.

The book of Esther records how the Persian king Ahasuerus signed a decree ordering the extermination of the Jewish people (Esth. 3:12-15). However, when the king understood the motivation and consequences behind the decree, he was able to support a second decree that effectively countered the first one (Esth. 8:8,11). But in Daniel's case, Darius could find no way to deliver Daniel from his own foolish edict, and Daniel's enemies were there to make sure the king did not make an exception. Daniel surely knew that his continuing to pray to God could mean his death, but he could not set aside his faith, even for thirty days. The laws of the Medes and Persians could not be changed, even if it meant Daniel's death, which was exactly what Daniel's enemies desired.

How are you challenged by Daniel's example of faithful prayer in this passage?

Faithfulness Spurs Hope

"The king gave the order" (v. 16) that he did not want to give. He had not come up with a plan to rescue Daniel (v. 14), and Daniel's opponents insisted the king carry out the sentence. They wanted to be rid of their rival, and now they thought they had succeeded.

The king's soldiers took Daniel and "threw him into the lions' den." The word translated "den" also can mean "pit" and naturally would have had a depth sufficient to keep lions from climbing out. We do not know exactly how such a den or pit would have been configured. We do know that in the days of the early church, Christians were thrown to the lions in the Roman Colosseum.

The king's words to Daniel—"May your God, whom you continually serve, rescue you!" (v. 16)—expressed the king's urgent hope that somehow Daniel's God would rescue His servant from the lions. The octogenarian Daniel would not survive without God's help.

Verse 17 records the steps the officials took to ensure Daniel was not rescued. The stone that was "placed over the mouth of the den" was certainly already in use. However, the text records that "the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the signet rings of his nobles." This process involved sealing the edge of the stone with wax or clay and impressing the signet rings of the officials in the substance to verify their agreement with the sealing of the den.³

Kings and officials used personalized signet rings to confirm the legitimacy of a letter or decree. When King Ahasuerus gave his signet ring to Mordecai to carry out orders on his behalf (Esth. 8:2), he showed he completely trusted Mordecai. Any document or decree that was stamped with the king's signet ring carried the king's authority. The prophet Haggai compared Zerubbabel, a governor of Judah after the exile and a descendant of King David, to a signet ring (Hag. 2:23). In other words, Zerubbabel would act with God's authority.

The sealing of the lions' den seems somewhat parallel to the sealing of the tomb of Jesus. After Jesus was crucified, His opponents were afraid His disciples might steal the body and claim He had risen from the dead (Matt. 27:62-64). They therefore asked the Roman governor Pontius Pilate to secure the tomb with guards. Matthew adds the detail that the tomb was also sealed (vv. 65-66), presumably to warn anyone who saw it that the Roman government wanted it

Voices from THE CHURCH

"As Daniel was about to be thrown into the pit, his friend, the king, spoke to Daniel: 'May your God, whom you continually serve, rescue you!' . . . Daniel, however, was not resting in the king's concern or his hope. He was resting in the providence and sovereignty of his God."⁴

—Danny Akin

undisturbed. The Jewish leaders wanted to ensure their victory over Jesus was complete. Likewise, Daniel's opponents wanted to ensure the totality of their victory over Daniel.

Darius "went to his palace" (Dan. 6:18) after ordering Daniel thrown into the den and the den sealed. However, the matter was not over in the king's eyes. Instead, he "spent the night fasting" as he considered how his foolish decree had resulted in the almost certain death of his most trusted official. In Old Testament times, fasting was sometimes a sign of mourning. The men of Jabesh-gilead who buried King Saul after his death in battle fasted in observance of his death (1 Sam. 31:11-13). The prophet Isaiah told his hearers that God wanted their fasting accompanied by humility and acts of kindness toward others (Isa. 58:5-8). Jesus denounced those who wanted others to see their fasting and be impressed with their supposed spiritual maturity (Matt. 6:16-18). He told them instead to fast in secret, letting their fasting be only between them and God.

The word translated "diversions" (Dan. 6:18) occurs only here in the Bible, and its exact meaning is unknown. The context suggests that the king's officials thought the king needed something to get his mind off his troubles, but the king did not want that. He could not sleep as he considered Daniel's situation and his own. He had failed to rescue Daniel from his own decree, and now he could not sleep knowing his trusted official was likely dead. He had no idea what the morning would bring!

How do you think about the suffering you experience in life? How should you?

Those who do not live in faith will face punishment and death (Daniel 6:19-24).

Notes

¹⁹ At the first light of dawn the king got up and hurried to the lions' den. ²⁰ When he reached the den, he cried out in anguish to Daniel. "Daniel, servant of the living God," the king said, "has your God, whom you continually serve, been able to rescue you from the lions?" ²¹ Then Daniel spoke with the king: "May the king live forever. ²² My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths; and they haven't harmed me, for I was found innocent before him. And also before you, Your Majesty, I have not done harm." ²³ The king was overjoyed and gave orders to take Daniel out of the den. When Daniel was brought up from the den, he was found to be unharmed, for he trusted in his God. ²⁴ The king then gave the command, and those men who had maliciously accused Daniel were brought and thrown into the lions' den—they, their children, and their wives. They had not reached the bottom of the den before the lions overpowered them and crushed all their bones.

God May Vindicate His Faithful People

Darius took action "at the first light of dawn" (v. 19). He had not slept during the night because of his concern for Daniel (v. 18), so the night must have seemed extremely long. He arose and "hurried to the lions' den." The Aramaic word translated "hurried" carries with it the notion of anxiety or alarm. A form of the word occurs elsewhere in the book of Daniel, describing Daniel's alarm over Nebuchadnezzar's dream (4:19) as well as Nebuchadnezzar's alarm when he saw Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego delivered from the fiery furnace (3:24). King Belshazzar, Babylon's



last king, also showed alarm when the handwriting on the wall appeared in his palace (translated “terrified” [5:6,9]). At any rate, the king hastened to the den, although he certainly did not expect a good result.

Darius reached the den and “cried out in anguish” (6:20). Interestingly, as Darius called out in anguish, he addressed Daniel as “servant of the living God.” He did not know at this point that God had rescued Daniel, so we may wonder why he referred to Daniel as such. Perhaps he had seen Daniel’s faithfulness to God during the time Daniel had served him. The king shouted: “Has your God, whom you continually serve, been able to rescue you from the lions?”

Imagine the king’s joy when he heard Daniel respond from the den, “May the king live forever” (v. 21)! Daniel explained how God had rescued him: “My God sent his angel and shut the lions’ mouths” (v. 22). The text provides only Daniel’s testimony as to the nature of his deliverance. This contrasts with Daniel 3, where the king saw a heavenly being walking amidst the flames (3:25).

Daniel also explained why the lions had not harmed him: “I was found innocent before [my God].” God’s rescue of Daniel was the ultimate “not guilty” verdict! According to one commentary, Daniel was found innocent by ordeal:

“Ordeal” describes a judicial situation in which the accused is placed in the hand of God using some mechanism, generally one that will put the accused in jeopardy. If the deity intervenes to protect the accused from harm, the verdict is innocent. Most trials by ordeal in the ancient Near East involved dangers such as water, fire or

poison. When the accused was exposed to these threats, he or she was in effect being assumed guilty until the deity declared otherwise.⁵

With the thought of ordeal in mind, Daniel was found by God to be innocent. Daniel also affirmed he had done nothing against the king; he had served faithfully and bore Darius no ill will for putting him in the den.

God's rescue of Daniel shows His omnipotence. God can do anything as long as it does not contradict His own nature or law. As Christians, we can rest in the confidence that our omnipotent God is also good and is working for our good and His glory (Rom. 8:28).

In what circumstances can trusting God's power bring you comfort?

God Punishes the Faithless

"The king was overjoyed" (Dan. 6:23) to hear Daniel's voice and quickly gave orders to take him out of the den. Once he knew Daniel was alive, he may have wanted to keep Daniel from any further harm, lest he risk angering Daniel's God further. Darius then issued a decree throughout the kingdom that all peoples everywhere honor Daniel's God (vv. 25-27).

When Daniel was brought up from the den, he was found to be unharmed (literally "no injury was found in him"). The description parallels Daniel 3:27, which describes the condition of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego when they emerged from the furnace. They had not suffered any harm in the furnace, nor had Daniel suffered any harm in the den of lions. Their God had saved them completely.

But we should not understand this passage to mean that all persecuted believers will be saved from

Notes

THEOLOGY Connection

GOD IS OMNIPOTENT: God is all-powerful: there is nothing God cannot do so long as it does not contradict His own nature or law. God has power and authority over the universe. He created, from the largest solar system to the smallest particle. Affirming that God is all-powerful does not mean that God can sin since that would go against His perfect moral nature. As Christians, we rest in the belief that the God who has all power is good, and we gain great comfort by knowing that an all-powerful God is working for our good and joy.

Godly ATTRIBUTE

FAITH: The Bible defines faith as “the reality of what is hoped for, the proof of what is not seen” (Heb. 11:1). Faith for Daniel in Persia is the same as faith for us today, though we are further along in the story of salvation. We have seen the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, for which Daniel only hoped. Yet like Daniel, we do await the second coming of Christ. Our faith serves as the proof of what is not seen with our eyes, the belief in true things that have yet to pass but are as sure as the ground we are standing on.

death if they trust in God. Throughout church history, many Christians have died for their faith because they refused to renounce Jesus. God is able to save us in such life-threatening circumstances to bring glory to Himself (3:17). But sometimes He chooses to bring glory to Himself through the martyrdom of His saints (2 Tim. 4:6-8). No matter the outcome, the Bible assures us that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ and that one day He will secure absolute victory for all His people (Rom. 8:28-39).

In addition to his decree commanding the praise of Daniel’s God, Darius issued another command regarding “those men who had maliciously accused Daniel” (Dan. 6:24). In an ironic twist, Daniel’s opponents were thrown into the lions’ den along with their families, according to Persian custom.⁶ The statement that “they had not reached the bottom of the den before the lions overpowered them” stresses their guilt and the severity of their punishment.

Following God faithfully can result in persecution. Yet knowing God is with us and has saved us through Jesus should empower us to continue to live faithfully. God may choose to work in a miraculous way to deliver us from a life-threatening punishment, or He may choose to allow us to glorify Him through dying for Him. Regardless, we believers don’t need to fear death because the Lord has the power to raise us from the dead, whereas those without Christ will suffer an eternal death. Daniel’s life should continue to inspire us to serve our God faithfully for as many days as He gives us.

What does this passage teach us about God’s justice?

Key Concept: We honor God when we live in faith and trust God in all situations.



HEAD

How has your faith in God sustained you through difficult times?



HEART

What fears keep you from bold, faithful obedience to God in the world?



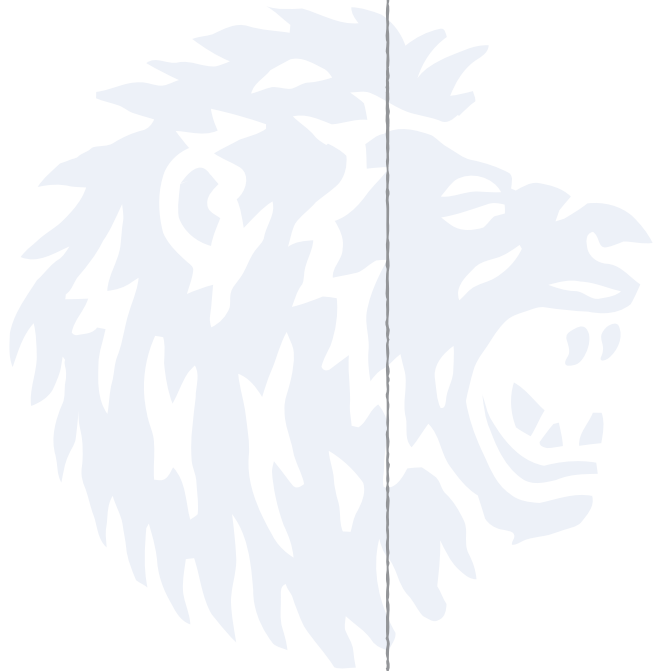
HANDS

How will you express your faith in Jesus outwardly this week?

Notes

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DOMINION

CORE PASSAGE: DANIEL 7:2-14

Context: The book of Daniel is divided into two main parts. The first six chapters are narratives, such as the fiery furnace, the writing on the wall, and the lions' den. The last six chapters contain four visions of the future the Lord gave to Daniel as a prophet. Daniel 7 is the pivot point bridging the two halves, connecting the narratives to the grander events happening in the world. In this first vision, which Daniel received in the first year of King Belshazzar's rule over Babylon (7:1), sometime before the writing on the wall, Daniel describes four beasts representing four powerful kingdoms, but above them all is the kingdom of God.

Key Concept: God will establish His forever kingdom through Jesus Christ, the Son of Man.

DAILY READINGS

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 1: Daniel 7 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 4: Daniel 10–11 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 2: Daniel 8 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 5: Daniel 12 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 3: Daniel 9 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 6: Psalm 93 |

Though oppressive powers seem unstoppable, they are temporary
(Daniel 7:2-8).

² Daniel said, “In my vision at night I was watching, and suddenly the four winds of heaven stirred up the great sea. ³ Four huge beasts came up from the sea, each different from the other. ⁴ The first was like a lion but had eagle’s wings. I continued watching until its wings were torn off. It was lifted up from the ground, set on its feet like a man, and given a human mind. ⁵ Suddenly, another beast appeared, a second one, that looked like a bear. It was raised up on one side, with three ribs in its mouth between its teeth. It was told, ‘Get up! Gorge yourself on flesh.’ ⁶ After this, while I was watching, suddenly another beast appeared. It was like a leopard with four wings of a bird on its back. It had four heads, and it was given dominion. ⁷ After this, while I was watching in the night visions, suddenly a fourth beast appeared, frightening and dreadful, and incredibly strong, with large iron teeth. It devoured and crushed, and it trampled with its feet whatever was left. It was different from all the beasts before it, and it had ten horns. ⁸ While I was considering the horns, suddenly another horn, a little one, came up among them, and three of the first horns were uprooted before it. And suddenly in this horn there were eyes like the eyes of a human and a mouth that was speaking arrogantly.”

Earthly Kingdoms Rule by God’s Decree

The book of Daniel divides neatly into two parts. Daniel 1–6 contains stories regarding Daniel and his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Daniel 7–12 contains Daniel’s visions of the future.



Scan this QR code to access this session's Scripture passages.

Notes

Daniel 7 records such a vision from “the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon” (v. 1), which was about 553 BC.¹ God sometimes used visions to communicate His messages to people (Isa. 1:1; 2:1; Zech. 1:8–6:15).

Daniel described the vision in his own words, as he did for all the visions in Daniel 7–12. Daniel 7 is the only vision in the book of Daniel that came to him through a dream (v. 1) and the only one that came at night (v. 2). Daniel 7:1-14 records the vision’s primary details, whereas Daniel 7:15-28 records an explanation of the vision’s details. Scholars have also noted the similarities between the vision of Daniel 7 and King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of a statue in Daniel 2. Much of our understanding of our focal passage comes from Daniel 2:31-45 and 7:15-28.

The word translated “watching” (v. 2) is related to the word “vision” and highlights Daniel’s careful observation of what he saw. The expression “four winds of heaven” also occurs in the book of Revelation (Rev. 7:1), where it appears together with the expression “four winds of the earth.” The winds “stirred up the great sea” (Dan. 7:2), symbolizing God’s preparing to do a great work. Some interpreters have understood “the great sea” as the Mediterranean Sea; others understand it more symbolically as a vast ocean out of which the kingdoms in Daniel’s vision will arise.

As Daniel watched, he saw “four huge beasts” that “came up from the sea” (v. 3). At this moment, Daniel did not yet know what his vision meant. He would receive the interpretation later (vv. 15-27), but for now, he watched in awe. He would later learn that these four beasts represented four earthly kings and kingdoms, “each different from the other.” Each exhibited distinct features, and each ruled only as God permitted.

The first beast Daniel saw in his vision “was like a lion but had eagle’s wings” (v. 4). The word “like” also occurs in verses 5 and 6 in connection with the second and third beasts. We must remember that as Daniel described what he saw, certain aspects of it went beyond anything he had ever seen. The visions of Daniel 2 and 7 describe the same phenomenon: four earthly kingdoms followed by the kingdom of God. Most interpreters understand the four earthly kingdoms as Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome.² Thus, the lion with eagle’s wing represents the kingdom of Babylon (609–539 BC). Babylon was characterized as both a lion and an eagle in the Bible (Jer. 4:7; 49:19,22; Lam. 4:19; Ezek. 17:3), and statues of winged lions have been discovered in Babylon’s ruins.

As the vision progressed, Daniel saw that the beast’s “wings were torn off.” Earlier, God humbled Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon for his pride and gave him the mind of an animal until he acknowledged God’s sovereignty (Dan. 4:29-37), at which point he was again “given a human mind” (7:4) and his throne.

The second beast Daniel saw “looked like a bear” that was “raised up on one side, with three ribs in its mouth” (v. 5). Scholars have identified this beast with the blended kingdom of Medo-Persia (539–330 BC), which featured a blending of the kingdoms of Media and Persia, with Persia being the dominant force. The three ribs likely represent the nations of Babylon, Lydia, and Egypt that Persia defeated.

The third beast Daniel saw “was like a leopard with four wings of a bird on its back” (v. 6). Like the lion, it had wings, but in contrast, “it had four heads.” Scholars have identified this beast with the kingdom of Greece (330–63 BC), which defeated Persia under

Alexander the Great. Some have identified the leopard's four heads as the four generals of Alexander who divided up his empire when he died suddenly without an heir in 323 BC.

Certainly Daniel was alarmed as he saw each of these three beasts, and one more beast was to come. However, each beast and the conquering kingdom it represented only had sovereignty as God allowed it. Today's world also has many leaders who oppose God and His ways, but God is still in control. In fact, the apostle Paul encouraged us to pray for our leaders, since God established them in their roles (Rom. 13:1-7).

Why do you think Daniel's vision represented kingdoms with beasts?

Earthly Kings Rule Arrogantly

Daniel "continued watching in the night visions" when suddenly a fourth beast appeared (v. 7). This beast had no parallel in Daniel's experience, and he described it as "frightening and dreadful, and incredibly strong, with large iron teeth." Its devouring, crushing, and trampling everything made it different from the previous beasts. This kingdom exceeded all the others.

Daniel also saw that the beast "had ten horns." As he pondered the meaning of these horns, "suddenly another horn, a little one came up among them" (v. 8). This eleventh horn caused three of the original ten horns to be "uprooted." Interestingly, this horn had human features: "eyes like the eyes of the human and a mouth that was speaking arrogantly" (v. 8). Interpreters have identified this fourth kingdom as the kingdom of Rome, which officially became the dominant power in the ancient world in 63 BC, when Pompey,

under the command of Julius Caesar, defeated Jerusalem. The Roman Empire was unlike anything that had come before:

Rome possessed a power and longevity unlike anything the world had ever known. Nations were crushed under the iron boot of the Roman legions, its power was virtually irresistible, and the extent of its influence surpassed the other three kingdoms.³

The ten horns on the fourth beast are ten kings who arise from the Roman Empire, or its remnant (v. 24), although their identity is uncertain or unknown. The eleventh horn, the little horn, is often identified as the antichrist, who appears during the great tribulation period at the end of time and opposes God's forces as a great world leader (v. 25; 2 Thess. 2:3-10; Rev. 13:1-8). However, his power will not last forever, and he will be destroyed (Dan. 7:26).

Throughout history, people have tried to identify the antichrist. Some have linked him with Nero, one of the Roman Empire's fiercest persecutors of Christians and the one who ordered the executions of Paul and Peter. However, most interpreters today, but not all, understand Daniel's words to represent the last days rather than the first century. The apostle John wrote that many antichrists had appeared in his day (1 John 2:18-19,22; 4:3). Many in the world display an anti-Christian spirit through their opposition to God and His Messiah, Jesus. But the Scriptures also point ahead to a world figure who will embody all that opposes Christ and who is the encapsulation of all such opposition of all ages. Jesus will defeat him at His second coming (2 Thess. 2:8; Rev. 19:19-20).

Notes

Voices from CHURCH HISTORY

*"From God's point of view the state is not so much a noble, glorious thing as it is an animal that conquers, devours, and tears those subject to it."*⁴

—James
Montgomery Boice
(1938–2000)

THEOLOGY Connection

THE KINGDOM: The Kingdom of God includes both His general sovereignty over the universe and His particular kingship over men who willfully acknowledge Him as King. Particularly, the Kingdom is the realm of salvation into which men enter by trustful, childlike commitment to Jesus Christ.

How have you seen earthly kingdoms and nations devour people and display arrogance?

Daniel later recorded that he was “deeply distressed” and “terrified” at the vision he saw (Dan. 7:15). However, he learned through an angelic messenger that none of these four kingdoms would thwart the establishment of God’s eternal kingdom (vv. 17-18). Sometimes Christians become fearful as they consider the extent of evil in the world. Yet God gave Daniel this vision to encourage us, not to frighten us. God’s kingdom will prevail, so we should not fear but rather look to Jesus in faith and confidence. His kingdom will come!

God alone reigns supreme, and every other kingdom is subject to His will and judgment (Daniel 7:9-14).

⁹ “As I kept watching, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was white like snow, and the hair of his head like whitest wool. His throne was flaming fire; its wheels were blazing fire. ¹⁰ A river of fire was flowing, coming out from his presence. Thousands upon thousands served him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was convened, and the books were opened. ¹¹ I watched, then, because of the sound of the arrogant words the horn was speaking. As I continued watching, the beast was killed and its body destroyed and given over to the burning fire. ¹² As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was removed, but an extension of life was granted to them for a certain period of time. ¹³ I continued watching in the night visions, and suddenly one like a son of man was coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached

the Ancient of Days and was escorted before him.¹⁴ He was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, so that those of every people, nation, and language should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will not be destroyed.

God's Kingdom Prevails over Earthly Kingdoms

Each of the kingdoms would exercise great authority on earth and possess distinct characteristics. But the focus of Daniel's vision in verse 9 shifted to heaven, God's ultimate kingdom, where "thrones were set in place."

In the midst of these thrones, the Ancient of Days took His seat. The title "Ancient of Days" occurs three times in the Old Testament, all in Daniel 7 (vv. 9,13,22). The term describes God sitting in judgment over the nations and those who oppose Him. The description of His clothing being snowy white likely represents his purity and holiness. The comparison of His hair to "whitest wool" probably signifies great age and the wisdom that comes with it. In Psalm 90:2, Moses affirmed of God, "From eternity to eternity, you are God." The same thought appears in Daniel 7. The reference to God's throne and its wheels as fire perhaps signifies both God's splendor and the wrath of His judgment.⁵ The Ancient of Days is the King of the heavens, and His throne reflects His greatness.

The scene then shifted to the great multitude before the throne, described first as "thousands upon thousands" and then "ten thousand times ten thousand" who stood before the Ancient of Days and served Him (Dan. 7:10). The words "the court was convened, and the books were opened" confirm that Daniel was

**Voices from
CHURCH HISTORY**

“What we are promised in this dream of Daniel is that the tyrannies of evil will be short lived and the kingdom of God will last forever.”⁶

–John Stott
(1921–2011)

seeing a vision of heaven’s courtroom, and the Ancient of Days was the judge. Daniel’s vision of the heavenly courtroom was interrupted by “the sound of the arrogant words the horn was speaking” (v. 11). This world leader of an earthly kingdom thought himself above judgment, and his words interrupted a truly majestic courtroom vision.

But then Daniel witnessed this beast’s destruction without any fanfare or drama: “The beast was killed and his body destroyed and given over to the burning fire” (v. 11). Earthly kings and kingdoms might seem great in their own eyes or in the eyes of earth’s citizens, but God determined their kingdoms, and when the day of their judgment came, they were done. So it will be with the judgment of the antichrist and his kingdom.

The expression “the rest of the beasts” (v. 12) most likely denotes any kingdoms subordinate to the kingdom of the antichrist. There may be a connection between the imagery here and Revelation 18, where the kingdoms of the earth mourn the destruction of Babylon. At any rate, these kingdoms had their authority to rule taken away, but “an extension of life was granted to them for a certain period of time” (Dan. 7:12). The period of time they had remaining is not stated, but it may refer to the great tribulation at the end of human history. The parallels between Daniel 7:10 and Revelation 7:9-10 are striking; perhaps Daniel and John saw similar visions.

What differences do you notice between the kingdoms of the earth and God’s kingdom?

God's Kingdom Will Be Complete at the Second Coming

Daniel 7:1-8 highlighted four earthly kingdoms that ruled only by the permission of the Ancient of Days, the Lord God, the greatest power of all (7:9-12). Now in verses 13-14, God's ultimate, eternal kingdom would begin with the coming of the Son of Man, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The expression "I continued watching" (v. 13) occurs here for the seventh time in Daniel's vision (vv. 2,4,6,7,9,11). Daniel saw "one like a son of man" who "was coming with the clouds of heaven." The expression "son of man" occurs over ninety times in the book of Ezekiel, where it was a title for the prophet. In its most basic sense, the term denotes a human being. However, Jesus also regularly used the term to describe Himself (Matt. 8:20; 25:31; Mark 10:45). In this passage, the expression clearly designates someone extraordinary—more than merely human—because He is coming with the clouds. Similar expressions from the book of Psalms describe God's amazing power (Pss. 68:4-6; 104:3), as do the words of the prophets Isaiah and Nahum (Isa. 19:1; Nah. 1:3).

When Jesus was on trial, the high priest asked Him directly if He was the Messiah, the Son of God (Mark 14:61). Jesus replied, "I am . . . and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming with the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14:62), thereby affirming He would one day fulfill Daniel's prophecy. The Jewish leaders took offense at this and condemned Jesus to death for what they considered blasphemy (Mark 14:63-64), but of course, it is true.

The Son of Man "approached the Ancient of Days and was escorted before him" (Dan. 7:13) There is a

**CHRIST
Connection**

God will give Jesus the authority to rule an everlasting kingdom of those who follow Him in faith. The “one like a son of man” (Dan. 7:13) is fulfilled in Jesus, who ascended into heaven in the presence of a cloud after His resurrection (Acts 1:9).

connection between verses 13-14 and Revelation 4–5. Revelation 5:5-7 describes Jesus stepping before God’s throne to take the scroll, signifying His authority to bring in God’s kingdom as Daniel described.

The Son of Man received “dominion and glory and a kingdom” (Dan. 7:14). Note that the Son of Man was given dominion and glory; God had given earthly rulers the power to rule, but their dominion and honor did not remotely match what God bestowed upon the Messiah.

Furthermore, the Son of Man was given a kingdom. Today, people enter this kingdom, this realm of salvation, by grace through faith—trustful, childlike commitment to Jesus Christ. When we pray for God’s kingdom to come (Matt. 6:10), we recognize there is more to God’s kingdom than what we see today. One day He will establish His kingdom completely. The full consummation of His kingdom awaits the return of Jesus Christ at the end of human history as we know it.

God’s desire for the Son of Man was that “those of every people, nation, and language should serve him” (Dan. 7:14). The word translated “serve” occurs eight times in the book of Daniel (3:12,14,17,18,28; 6:20; 7:14,27), and it designates service to a god or God. Indeed, Jesus, God’s Son, fulfills this prophecy, and when this day comes, people of all nations and languages will serve and worship Him just as they do God the Father.

The four earthly kingdoms enjoyed temporary dominion, but the Son of Man will have “an everlasting dominion.” Moreover, in contrast to the earthly kingdoms whose time ended when God determined, the Son of Man’s kingdom “will not be destroyed” (7:14).

The second coming of Jesus Christ will culminate human history and usher in an age like no one has ever seen. The prophet Daniel spoke of it, Jesus Himself affirmed it, and every day it is one day closer. Christians should live in anticipation of that great day, making our lives count to the fullest for His kingdom.

How can the promise of the kingdom of God help you respond faithfully to political turmoil and uncertainty today?



HEAD

How does your thinking about the world's kingdoms need to change considering Daniel 7?



HEART

How are you comforted knowing Jesus's everlasting kingdom is coming?

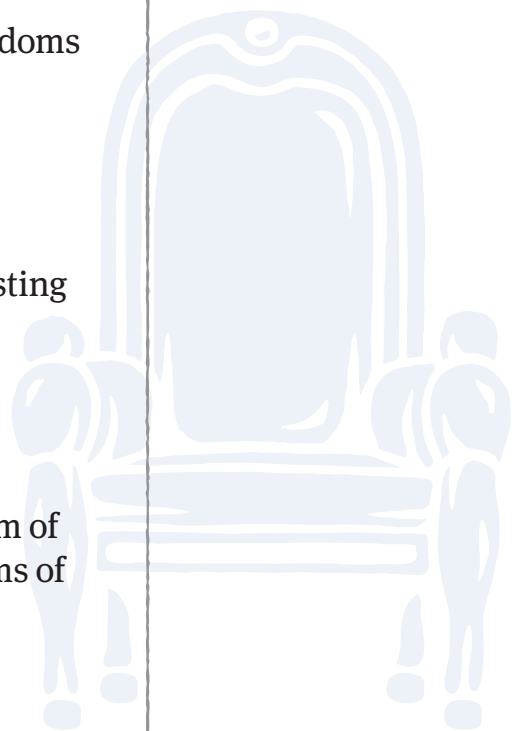


HANDS

How can you help people see the better kingdom of Christ contrasted with the sin-infected kingdoms of this world?

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THE GOSPEL PROJECT

UNIT 17

GOD IN THE RESTORATION



EZRA, ESTHER, ZECHARIAH



MEMORY VERSES

“Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout in triumph,
Daughter Jerusalem! Look, your King is coming to you;
he is righteous and victorious, humble and riding
on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. I will
cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the horse from
Jerusalem. The bow of war will be removed, and he
will proclaim peace to the nations. His dominion will
extend from sea to sea, from the Euphrates River
to the ends of the earth.”

—Zechariah 9:9-10



THE PEOPLE RESTORED

CORE PASSAGE: EZRA 1:5-8; 3:1-7

Context: After decades of disobedience and defeat, God's covenant people were a threadbare bunch. The best and brightest had been deported to Babylon, while the poor, the worn out, and the weak were left behind to work the land for the benefit of another nation. But after seventy years, a new power arrived on the scene to crush Babylon for their excesses, just as the Lord had promised. And King Cyrus of Persia then issued a decree allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple. God's people now held onto a thread of hope that restoration might come to their ragtag remnant.

Key Concept: God is faithful to reconcile and restore
His people to Himself.

DAILY READINGS

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 1: Joel 1:1–3:21 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 4: Ezra 2:1-70 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 2: 2 Chronicles 36:22-23 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 5: Ezra 3:1-13 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 3: Ezra 1:1-11 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 6: Psalm 126 |

God wants to restore us back into relationship with Him (Ezra 1:5-8).

⁵ So the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, along with the priests and Levites—everyone whose spirit God had roused—prepared to go up and rebuild the LORD’s house in Jerusalem. ⁶ All their neighbors supported them with silver articles, gold, goods, livestock, and valuables, in addition to all that was given as a freewill offering. ⁷ King Cyrus also brought out the articles of the LORD’s house that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem and had placed in the house of his gods. ⁸ King Cyrus of Persia had them brought out under the supervision of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah.

The Lord Stirs Up

The story of Israel in the Old Testament is a narrative of God’s people constantly failing and the Lord constantly restoring. From the start, Adam and Eve had a perfect relationship with God in the garden of Eden, yet they sinned against Him. God did not wipe them out but promised to send a deliverer one day (Gen. 3:15). As part of His plan, God chose to make Abraham and his descendants into a great nation, yet they failed too. After He delivered them from slavery in Egypt and gave them the promised land, they served worthless idols (Judg. 3:7). Even Israel’s greatest kings could not purify the hearts of the people. Despite God’s prophets calling the people to repent, they rejected God’s warnings until they were exiled to Babylon (2 Chron. 36:16-21). Yet God still had compassion on His people. The Lord showed them favor in the pagan land and promised He would lead them home again.



Scan this QR code to access this session's Scripture passages.

Notes

As we look at Ezra's recording of the exiles' return to the land, we see that the Lord initiated a restorative work in their hearts that led them to action. The Lord could have cut off the people in exile and never again shown them mercy or grace. Praise the Lord that He is kind and gracious to undeserving sinners!

When we think about the restoration that the Lord was doing in the book of Ezra, we should consider what restoration needs to happen in our own hearts and souls. As we see God's restorative and redemptive work in the Jews, let us look for areas in our hearts where we need to turn back in submission to the Lord.

The Lord was true to His promise that His people would return to the land after seventy years (Jer. 29:10). Now that the Jews had received the decree of the Persian king to return home, it was time for them to act. Another exodus story had begun.

In the first exodus, the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh (Ex. 7:3; 9:12). In the second exodus, the Lord "roused the spirit of King Cyrus to issue a proclamation throughout his entire kingdom" (Ezra 1:1). "Rouse" also means to "stir up" or "awake." Instead of hardening Cyrus's heart, God stirred it up so that Cyrus issued a proclamation that the people of God could return to their land and rebuild the temple of God in Jerusalem (vv. 2-4). The Lord moved the heart of the king so the people could begin the work of restoration.

While kings and kingdoms rise and fall, we can be certain that the Lord is ruling and reigning over all. The fact that the Lord can stir up the hearts of kings, presidents, politicians, and magistrates should give us great hope. Proverbs 21:1 says, "A king's heart is like channeled water in the LORD's hand: He directs it wherever he chooses." While sinful men and women

rise to power, we know that our God truly is “the LORD, the God of the heavens” (Ezra 1:2).

Verse 5 says that the Lord also “roused” the hearts of the family heads of Judah, Benjamin, and Levi. The word used for “roused” in verse 5 is the same word that was used in Ezra 1:1 referring to rousing the heart of King Cyrus. Therefore, the stirring that happened in the hearts of Cyrus and the leaders of the tribes was no coincidence. It was the prompting of the true and living God. The time of exile was over; thus, the people needed to act and follow the Lord’s leading to restore their homeland and, more importantly, to restore their relationship with the Lord. Just as God stirred up Cyrus to make the decree, here God stirred up the people to respond in action.

God was stirring up in the people the desire to “rebuild the LORD’s house in Jerusalem” (v. 5). When the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem in 586 BC, they destroyed the temple. The temple was meant to be the physical and symbolic place where God’s presence dwelled with His people. The temple’s destruction reflected that God no longer was with the people due to their unfaithfulness to Him. However, it was time for that relationship to be rebuilt and restored.

No doubt there were times in exile when people doubted God’s care and concern for them. Many of them likely doubted God would ever rescue them from their bondage. Yet God had given them favor with their captors and neighbors in the exile, and God “roused” the heart of the king and the hearts of the people to action so the people could return to Him and worship Him. God had proven true to His Word. He alone is worthy of worship.

Voices from CHURCH HISTORY

“Just as Cyrus, after destroying the empire of the Chaldeans, freed the people of God, and sent them back to their homeland and ordered them to rebuild the temple . . . so the mediator between God and humanity, after destroying all over the world the kingdom of the devil, called back from that tyranny his elect, who had been scattered, and now gathers them in his church.”¹
—Bede (c. 672–735)

This should bring comfort to many of us who are praying for unbelieving loved ones. Do not be discouraged; rather, pray that God would rouse and stir up their hearts so that they might repent of their sins and trust in the only One who can save them from their sins! God's desire is not that we remain in our sins but that we live in right relationship with Him.

As you look back, where can you see God's providential hand at work over your own life?

The Lord Provides

Even though God had disciplined the people for their unfaithfulness to Him, it was time for Him to restore them. In Egypt, when the people were set free from slavery, they plundered the Egyptians (Ex. 12:35-26). Here at the "new exodus," the people once again were given favor to leave the land while receiving "silver articles, gold, goods, livestock, and valuables, in addition to all that was given as a freewill offering" (Ezra 1:6). To the Jewish exiles, these gifts would have reminded them of God's faithfulness to bring them to the promised land centuries prior.

God had spoken through the prophet Isaiah that after the eventual exile of His people, He would begin something new—a second exodus event. God said:

Look, I am about to do something new; even now it is coming. Do you see it? Indeed, I will make a way in the wilderness, rivers in the desert. Wild animals—jackals and ostriches—will honor me, because I provide water in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people. The people I formed for myself will declare my praise. (Isa. 43:19-21)

Not only did God stir up their hearts to obedience, but God also provided lavishly for the people. The people would be sent back to their homeland having plundered the Persians, and they would be carrying back the vessels that were used in service at the temple.

Ezra 1:7 states, “King Cyrus also brought out the articles of the LORD’s house that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem and had placed in the house of his gods.” This verse reveals a contrast between Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus. The same word is used for “brought” and “taken” in this verse. Whenever Nebuchadnezzar would conquer a nation, he would confiscate their idols and place them in the temple of his gods, thus demonstrating that his gods were greater than the gods of any nation he conquered. However, Nebuchadnezzar did not take the Baals and Asherahs the Israelites worshiped that had caused God to drive them out of the land; he took the articles from the Lord’s temple as his prize (2 Kings 25:13-15).

Nebuchadnezzar thought he had defeated the Lord, when in fact it was the Lord who had allowed Nebuchadnezzar to punish the people for their unfaithfulness to Him. In Jeremiah 27:6, God described Nebuchadnezzar as “my servant.” Just as God used Nebuchadnezzar to take these vessels from the temple, God used Cyrus to return these temple vessels to their proper place. Once again, we see how God was sovereignly ruling over and orchestrating the nations for His purposes.

Returning the vessels to Jerusalem instead of simply making new ones was also from the Lord. The fact that these vessels had been kept and returned safely fulfilled God’s promise through the prophet Jeremiah. In Jeremiah 27:21-22, the Lord said:

GOSPEL Connection

Though God's people had been exiled, God had a plan for restoration, to bring them back in relationship with Him and back to a place of worship. Many years later, the ultimate restorative work of God is found in Jesus's sacrifice through His crucifixion, allowing forgiveness of sin to restore our relationship with God forever and saving us from death and separation from Him.

Yes, this is what the LORD of Armies, the God of Israel, says about the articles that remain in the temple of the Lord, in the palace of the king of Judah, and in Jerusalem: "They will be taken to Babylon and will remain there until I attend to them again." This is the LORD's declaration. "Then I will bring them up and restore them to this place."

Everything that God promised came to fruition. The people could trust Him even through the severe discipline they experienced.

God stirred up the people's hearts to action. Additionally He provided for them and their journey back to their homeland. They could trust Him and serve Him because He is always true to His word.

How have you seen God's providential and restorative hand at work through the storyline of the Old Testament?

Sacrifice is needed as part of our restoration with God (Ezra 3:1-7).

¹ When the seventh month arrived, and the Israelites were in their towns, the people gathered as one in Jerusalem. ² Jeshua son of Jozadak and his brothers the priests along with Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and his brothers began to build the altar of Israel's God in order to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the law of Moses, the man of God. ³ They set up the altar on its foundation and offered burnt offerings for the morning and evening on it to the LORD even though they feared the surrounding peoples. ⁴ They celebrated the Festival of Shelters as prescribed, and offered burnt offerings

each day, based on the number specified by ordinance for each festival day.⁵ After that, they offered the regular burnt offering and the offerings for the beginning of each month and for all the LORD's appointed holy occasions, as well as the freewill offerings brought to the LORD.⁶ On the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD, even though the foundation of the LORD's temple had not yet been laid.⁷ They gave money to the stonecutters and artisans, and gave food, drink, and oil to the people of Sidon and Tyre, so they would bring cedar wood from Lebanon to Joppa by sea, according to the authorization given them by King Cyrus of Persia.

The People Trusted the Lord

A remnant of the exiled people returned home to Judah. Ezra 2 contains a detailed list of those who made the journey to Jerusalem. Now that the exiles had returned, they had work to do regarding proper worship of the Lord in Jerusalem. In Ezra 3, the people began their most important mission: rebuilding the temple and restoring their sacrifices to the Lord.

The people faced a monumental task of rebuilding their homeland, and of chief importance was their worship. They needed the Lord to guide and protect them as they returned to the land and rebuilt their community. They needed to restore temple sacrifices to have their relationship with the Lord restored.

At the beginning of Ezra 3, we read that the people were back in their homeland to experience the arrival of the seventh month. This special month in their calendar contained the Day of Atonement and the Festival of Shelters, so the people who settled in Judah would need to make their pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Thus, like Abraham and Joshua, who built altars when they entered Canaan (Gen. 12:6-7; Josh. 8:30-35), the people raised an altar to the Lord (Ezra 3:2).

Notice how Zerubbabel and his brothers set up the altar: “as it is written in the law of Moses.” An important theme throughout Ezra was following and obeying the law of God. Ezra, as a priest and scribe, devoted himself to study and obey the law and to teach it to the returned exiles (7:10). This new altar would be set up “on its foundation” (3:3); it would be constructed over the place where the original altar of the temple had been. This act connected the people to their past. The act of the people setting up the altar was one of sacrificial trust. As the smell of offerings consumed by fire would fill the air, it was a reminder of how sacrifices were needed to atone for their sins.

The gathering of the people in Jerusalem itself was also an act of sacrificial trust in the Lord. In verse 3, they set up the altar and began morning and evening offerings “even though they feared the surrounding peoples.” Remember, the land of Israel had been resettled with foreigners when the Israelites were taken off into exile (see 2 Kings 17:24-41). The nations around them proved to be hostile to their rebuilding efforts:

The pilgrims couldn’t notify the local police that they would be away so the patrol cars could circle through every so often. When they went up to Jerusalem, their newly re-established homesteads in the towns and cities of their ancestors would be vacant and vulnerable.²

No, they would have to trust the Lord to protect their homes and possessions. The people could not rely on prideful self-sufficiency; they would need to trust and

obey the Lord. The protection they needed could only come from God.

For believers today, it is easy to go about our days and trust in ourselves, our technology, and/or our devices and forget our moment-by-moment dependence on the Lord. Yet sometimes difficult and dangerous circumstances arise, and we have to turn outside of ourselves. Where do you turn in those moments? The resettled Jewish people lived under constant threat, and this drove them to the only One who could protect them.

Why might the Jews who returned to Jerusalem have been so focused on setting up the altar, offering sacrifices, and celebrating prescribed festivals?

The People Sacrificed to the Lord

Ezra 3:4-7 describes the various sacrifices and offerings that the people reinstituted. Not only did the people offer sacrifices, but they also renewed the special festivals that reminded them of the Lord's faithfulness in the past, such as the Festival of Shelters. This festival was one of the three great feasts that Israel celebrated in the Old Testament. Leviticus 23:26-43 describes in detail how they were to build booths and live in them for seven days "so that your generations may know that I made the Israelites live in shelters when I brought them out of the land of Egypt" (v. 43). After the exile, this festival would be another reminder that just as God led them out of Egypt, so too had God led them out of exile.

Five times in Ezra 3:1-5, "burnt offerings" are mentioned. These sacrifices were needed to bring this

Voices from CHURCH HISTORY

*"Having begun, they kept up the continual burnt-offering . . . morning and evening. . . They had known by sad experience what it was to want the comfort of the daily sacrifice to plead in their daily prayers, and now that it was revived they resolved not to let it fall again. The daily lamb typified the Lamb of God, whose righteousness must be our confidence in all our prayers."*³
—Matthew Henry (1662–1714)

THEOLOGY Connection

CHRIST AS SACRIFICE: There are several signs, symbols, and pointers in the Old Testament that foreshadowed Christ as being the sacrificial Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world. However, unlike the sacrificial system of the Old Testament, whose sacrifices were unable to take away sin (Heb. 10:4), Christ's sacrifice on the cross was able to permanently, "once and for all," take away sins.

sinful people back to God. Their sin had created a barrier between them and God (Isa. 59:2). Only through a substitutionary offering could their relationship be restored. The sacrifice was meant to teach the people that they deserved the judgment—death—that fell upon the animal. These sacrifices were being reinstituted at the new altar “even though the foundation of the LORD’s temple had not yet been laid” (Ezra 3:6). The people also began to give of their possessions so that the preparations for the temple could begin.

The sacrifices and offerings given here at the new altar and eventually the new temple were never going to save the people from their sins permanently, but rather, they would teach them of the need for a perfect substitute. The writer of Hebrews said:

Since the law has only a shadow of the good things to come, and not the reality itself of those things, it can never perfect the worshipers by the same sacrifices they continually offer year after year. Otherwise, wouldn't they have stopped being offered, since the worshipers, purified once and for all, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? But in the sacrifices, there is a reminder of sins year after year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. (Heb. 10:1-4)

These sacrifices were meant to point to another sacrifice that would once and for all remove our sin and bring us into a right relationship with God. While the people in Ezra were led out of bondage in exile, the Lord Jesus Christ leads us believers out of bondage to sin and death so that we might dwell with the Lord forever in the new heavens and new earth.

What does worship and sacrifice look like today if there is no altar or physical sacrifice?

Notes



HEAD

What keeps you from trusting that God is for you and not against you?



HEART

What do you need to focus on in order to worship God with all your heart?



HANDS

What can you do this week to worship God as a living sacrifice?



References

1. Bede, quoted in Marco Conti and Gianluca Pilara, eds., *1–2 Kings, 1–2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 304.
2. James M. Hamilton, Jr. et al., *Exalting Jesus in Ezra–Nehemiah* (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2014), 19.
3. Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 617.

THE TEMPLE REBUILT

CORE PASSAGE: EZRA 6:6-12,16-22

Context: After the return to Jerusalem, God's remnant people prepared to rebuild the Lord's temple. The task ahead was daunting with opposition at every turn. On the surface, their work seemed insurmountable. Yet theirs was not a man-made assignment. They were commissioned by the Creator and Sustainer of all—the same God who providentially brought them back to their ancestral home and provided abundant supplies for the temple's reconstruction. This faithful Deliverer would continue to pave the way for them to complete the task, enabling them to proclaim His excellencies along the way.

Key Concept: God will restore worship of Him, resulting in a joyful celebration of His faithfulness.

DAILY READINGS

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 1: Ezra 4:1-5 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 4: Ezra 6:1-15 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 2: Ezra 4:24–5:2 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 5: Ezra 6:16-22 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 3: Ezra 5:3-17 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 6: Psalm 20 |

God is able to use any means to restore worship of Him (Ezra 6:6-12).

⁶ Therefore, you must stay away from that place, Tattenai governor of the region west of the Euphrates River, Shethar-bozenai, and your colleagues, the officials in the region. ⁷ Leave the construction of the house of God alone. Let the governor and elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its original site. ⁸ I hereby issue a decree concerning what you are to do, so that the elders of the Jews can rebuild the house of God: The cost is to be paid in full to these men out of the royal revenues from the taxes of the region west of the Euphrates River, so that the work will not stop. ⁹ Whatever is needed—young bulls, rams, and lambs for burnt offerings to the God of the heavens, or wheat, salt, wine, and oil, as requested by the priests in Jerusalem—let it be given to them every day without fail, ¹⁰ so that they can offer sacrifices of pleasing aroma to the God of the heavens and pray for the life of the king and his sons. ¹¹ I also issue a decree concerning any man who interferes with this directive: Let a beam be torn from his house and raised up; he will be impaled on it, and his house will be made into a garbage dump because of this offense. ¹² May the God who caused his name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who dares to harm or interfere with this house of God in Jerusalem. I, Darius, have issued the decree. Let it be carried out diligently.

God Gives Protection Through Unlikely Allies

After a period of starting and stopping work on rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem, the Jews received the decree of King Darius affirming they would be able to rebuild their temple in Jerusalem. Darius even told



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Notes

FIGURE Study

TATTENAI: Tattenai was the governor of the Trans-Euphrates division of the Medo-Persian Empire. Naturally, he investigated the Jews' attempt to rebuild the temple. He asked the king to find a copy of Cyrus's edict. Once he received affirmation, he demonstrated that he was a good bureaucrat by diligently carrying out the king's orders (Ezra 6:13).¹

the local provincial leaders to leave the Jews alone and not interfere with their rebuilding efforts. Even though the enemies of God tried relentlessly to stop the rebuilding of His temple, God had a plan in place that would not be thwarted by the enemies' schemes. God's people needed to continue to serve Him and follow His commands even through the constant opposition they faced.

Despite the difficulty the Jews faced, they listened to the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, who encouraged them to get to work again on the temple. This resumption of work caught the eye of the local government official Tattenai. Tattenai asked the Jews, "Who gave you the order to rebuild this temple and finish this structure?" (5:9). The people replied to Tattenai:

We are the servants of the God of the heavens and earth, and we are rebuilding the temple that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished. . . . However, in the first year of King Cyrus of Babylon, he issued a decree to rebuild the house of God. He also took from the temple in Babylon the gold and silver articles of God's house that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in Jerusalem and carried them to the temple in Babylon. He released them from the temple in Babylon to a man named Sheshbazzar, the governor by the appointment of King Cyrus. (vv. 11-14)

At this response, Tattenai sent a letter to King Darius to investigate the legitimacy of the Jews' claims. It took about ten years, but Darius investigated and found that Cyrus did decree the Jews could rebuild their temple. Thus, Darius made a new decree saying

that not only could the Jews rebuild but that the cost of the rebuild would be paid from the royal revenue (6:8).

Darius's decree informed Tattenai and other government officials that they must "stay away" from the place (v. 6) and "leave the construction of the house of God alone" (v. 7). Twice, Darius made it clear that he did not want anyone interfering with the rebuilding.

Despite the years of opposition, God had a plan in place for the people to finish rebuilding the temple. At times, the Lord needed to send prophets to exhort the people to get the rebuilding work started again. Now, the exhortation came from a pagan king. God's protection through Darius was seen graphically at the end of the decree. Anyone who interfered with the rebuilding of the temple would be publicly humiliated and impaled (v. 11). God Himself would judge severely anyone who tried to thwart them, whether commoners, governors, or kings (v. 12).

There are countless examples of opposition to God's people all around the world today. We often hear stories of how our brothers and sisters in Christ all over the world face pressure and persecution from governments and radical groups. For those of us who live in a context where we are not actively persecuted, we should be incredibly thankful to the Lord and at the same time prayerful for our fellow Christians who live under the constant threat of persecution.

Despite whatever persecution or trials we may face in this life, we can be encouraged by the fact that God is with us. The Lord never abandoned the people who were seeking to faithfully obey Him here in Ezra. God had already directed the people to rebuild the temple, and His faithfulness was on display in how He used the pagan king to protect the reconstruction.

When has opposition discouraged you from obeying the Lord?

God Gives Provision Through Unlikely Allies

Have you ever experienced God's provision from an unlikely place? Maybe you were going through a rough stretch, and an unexpected call or text from a friend helped encourage you. Maybe you were experiencing financial hardship, and the Lord provided for you unexpectedly. The Jews here likely were concerned about whether or not they would be able to finish rebuilding the temple. The constant stopping and starting of the work would have been draining.

Now that Governor Tattenai had begun to investigate their latest attempt to rebuild, certainly there were some who thought it was all over. The concern and tension among the people would have been great when the decree from Darius arrived. How incredible that news would have been to hear that not only was Darius going to protect them as they rebuilt but he was also going to provide the supplies needed for their temple!

God had orchestrated the rebuilding of His temple, even directing the help of a foreign king. This provision of God through Darius carried with it a sense of urgency. Darius said that the payments made from the royal revenue were to be made "so that the work will not stop" (v. 8). The king did not want anything to hold up their rebuilding efforts. This certainly would have been unexpected good news for the people who had faced delays for nearly a decade.

Not only would Darius provide the money and supplies needed for the temple building itself, he also promised to provide sacrifices for the offerings to God

(v. 9). Darius was known for allowing the nations he conquered certain freedoms of religion. When it came to how he treated them, he often allowed them to continue worshiping their gods. Certainly, Darius was motivated here by seeking to keep political peace, yet the living God used Darius's generosity to bring about His plan. Darius even asked the priests to "pray for the life of the king and his sons" (v. 10).

God's protection and provision for the people came from an unlikely place in King Darius. When God makes a promise, He will deliver on that promise. God's promise that the temple would be rebuilt was a reminder of His steadfast faithfulness.

God's faithfulness should bring us great courage as we seek to live for Him moment by moment. While we face trials and hardship, we can be certain that He will protect and provide for His own. All who place their faith in Christ as their Savior and repent of their sins can be certain that nothing will separate them from the love of Christ (Rom. 8:39).

How does God's sovereignty relate to His faithfulness, as seen in this passage?

When we celebrate God's past faithfulness, joyful worship ensues (Ezra 6:16-22).

¹⁶ Then the Israelites, including the priests, the Levites, and the rest of the exiles, celebrated the dedication of the house of God with joy. ¹⁷ For the dedication of God's house they offered one hundred bulls, two hundred rams, and four hundred lambs, as well as twelve male goats as a sin offering for all Israel—one for each Israelite tribe. ¹⁸ They also appointed the priests by their

THEOLOGY Connection

GOD IS FAITHFUL: God's faithfulness means He keeps His word and always fulfills His promises (1Cor. 1:9; 2Tim. 2:13; 1Pet. 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.

Voices from CHURCH HISTORY

“If the Lord be with us, we have no cause of fear. His eye is upon us, his arm over us, his ear open to our prayer; his grace sufficient, his promise unchangeable.

Under his protection, though the path of duty should lie through fire and water, we may cheerfully and confidently pursue it.”²

—John Newton
(1725–1807)

divisions and the Levites by their groups to the service of God in Jerusalem, according to what is written in the book of Moses.¹⁹ The exiles observed the Passover on the fourteenth day of the first month.²⁰ All of the priests and Levites were ceremonially clean, because they had purified themselves. They killed the Passover lamb for themselves, their priestly brothers, and all the exiles.²¹ The Israelites who had returned from exile ate it, together with all who had separated themselves from the uncleanness of the Gentiles of the land in order to worship the LORD, the God of Israel.²² They observed the Festival of Unleavened Bread for seven days with joy, because the LORD had made them joyful, having changed the Assyrian king’s attitude toward them, so that he supported them in the work on the house of the God of Israel.

The People Dedicated the Temple with Joy

After the Lord provided the supplies needed, the temple was completed. The opponents to the rebuild stopped harassing the people, and the prophets Haggai and Zechariah encouraged the people to finish the task that God gave them (v. 14). Now that the work was completed, it was time for the people to dedicate the temple. It was time to celebrate God’s faithfulness.

Notice how the text says, “Then the Israelites, including the priests, the Levites, and the rest of the exiles, celebrated” (v. 16). Although the exiles who returned from captivity were from only three tribes (Judah, Benjamin, Levi; 1:5), they were seen by the author to represent all of Israel. These people present at the dedication of the temple were the faithful remnant that God had kept.

As they gathered to dedicate the temple, they did so “with joy” (6:16). Despite all the sorrow they had previously experienced, at the dedication of the temple, the people were joyful. God was faithful, and His faithfulness produced gladness. So they worshiped.

At the dedication of the temple, the people offered sacrifices. While these sacrifices in Ezra 6 were much fewer in number than the sacrifices that Solomon offered at the dedication of his temple (1 Kings 8:5), they were offered with great joy. The sacrifices symbolized the reconciliation between God and His people. They offered “one hundred bulls, two hundred rams, and four hundred lambs, as well as twelve male goats as a sin offering for all Israel—one for each Israelite tribe” (Ezra 6:17). Sin offerings had not been offered at the temple for decades, seeing as there was no temple in which to offer them. Thus, it was fitting that at the dedication of the temple, a sin offering would be made, and they made twelve, one for each tribe of Israel, present or not. This was a visible reminder for the people that they needed atonement for their sin to be purified of their guilt and to be in relationship with the Lord.

The final verse of the temple dedication narrative states, “They also appointed the priests by their divisions and the Levites by their groups to the service of God in Jerusalem, according to what is written in the book of Moses” (v. 18). The priests and Levites were organized to fulfill their duties given in the law. The priests and Levites had specific duties regarding sacrifices and purification rituals. The reason for the mention of these duties was to show that this new temple was a genuine house of worship for the people.

The temple was not just another building for the people of God. God gave the people the temple so that they might have a visible picture of His rule in their lives and their need to be brought into right relationship with Him. The writer of Hebrews described the temple as a copy and shadow of what was in heaven (Heb. 8:5). Until Jesus Christ came to dwell with us, the temple in Jerusalem would point forward to God's promises.

In Christ, we do not offer sacrifices for our sins anymore because Jesus was the ultimate substitute for our sins. As the author of Hebrews wrote:

Every priest stands day after day ministering and offering the same sacrifices time after time, which can never take away sins. But this man [Jesus], after offering one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God. He is now waiting until his enemies are made his footstool. For by one offering he has perfected forever those who are sanctified. (10:11-14)

We no longer offer sacrifices of bulls, goats, or lambs because they all pointed to the final, perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ on behalf of sinners. But because of Jesus's sacrifice, we do still worship Him with joy.

What obstacles in your life might you need to address to worship God actively, corporately, and joyfully?

The People Celebrated with Joy

The returned exiles had experienced great loss and hardship; however, their temple was rebuilt. The people had renewed hope. The people experienced

firsthand God's sustaining grace in their lives. He could have left them in captivity, yet He graciously delivered them and let them return to their homeland. It was time for them to celebrate not just what God did in their lives but in the history of their people. The people celebrated the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread together.

The Passover was an important feast in the life of the Jews because it was a reminder of how God had saved their people out of slavery in Egypt by the death of the firstborn sons of Egypt. The Lord had commanded the Israelites to spread the blood of a lamb on their doorposts (Ex. 12:7), and the destroyer would "pass over" their houses. They were also instructed to bake bread without any leaven, since they would need to leave Egypt quickly. For seven days, they could not have any bread with leaven (yeast) in their homes (v. 15). The Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread were supposed to be observed each year as a reminder of these events.

Back in Ezra 3, the people celebrated the Festival of Shelters, which reminded the people of the wilderness wandering and God's protection. Now that the temple was completed, the people celebrated Passover a little more than a month after the rebuilding of the temple was finished.

Ezra 6:21 explains who participated in the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread: "The Israelites who had returned from exile ate it, together with all who had separated themselves from the uncleanness of the Gentiles in the land." Notice that it was not only the returned exiles. The participants likely included resident aliens who had been circumcised so they could worship the Lord as well (Ex. 12:48).

CHURCH
Connection

God made the rebuilding of the temple possible so the people could see His faithfulness to them, resulting in joy and celebration. God's faithfulness is revealed ultimately in His provision of His Son, Jesus Christ, which results in ultimate joy and celebration for believers today.

The people were able to begin a new life of worship and celebration for what God did for them in their lives and in the history of their people. This joy was not an artificial act but came from what the Lord had done for them. The text says they observed these special days with joy “because the LORD had made them joyful” (Ezra 6:22). The Lord produced this joy in their hearts because He acted mightily to save and provide for them. The people rejoiced because God reigns over all, even the heart of the most powerful man in the world at that time.

Joy accompanied their worship because they remembered God's faithfulness in the present and the past. This is a great reminder for all of us. When we find ourselves going through trials and hardship, we should call to mind God's faithfulness in our lives. Joy is not simply walking around with a fake smile on our face. No, our joy is rooted in the God who saves; He is the source of our joy. Maybe you find yourself in a deep struggle today; see what the Lord did in the lives of the people here in Ezra and be reminded that the Lord continues to work today!

The salvation that God provided in the exodus was very similar to what God did in the exile. Where there was bondage, now there was freedom! The exodus and the return from exile both were a picture of the salvation that God has provided in Christ. The people were in bondage to their captors; in a similar way all people are in bondage to sin. Jesus Christ came to make a way for us to be let out of our bondage to sin and death.

How can remembering God's past and present faithfulness help you worship God more deeply today?

Key Concept: God will restore worship of Him, resulting in a joyful celebration of His faithfulness.



HEAD

What are some ways you can regularly remind yourself that you exist for God's glory?



HEART

Who or what has been the true object of your worship lately? Why?



HANDS

How can you better enjoy and employ God's Word, God's Spirit, and God's people this week?

Notes

References

1. Victor Harold Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, and John H. Walton, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Ezr 5:3.
2. John Newton, *The Works of the Rev. John Newton . . . to which are Prefixed Memoirs of His Life, &c, Volume 1* (Philadelphia, PA: Uriah Hunt, 1839), 272.



THE KING PROMISED



CORE PASSAGE: ZECHARIAH 9:9-17

Context: In His perfect timing, the Lord used prophets as His mouthpiece to deliver divine messages to His people. Often they warned the people of consequences for their sin while also holding out a future hope. The book of Zechariah is split into two sections. Chapters 1–8 called the Jews to reject complacency and return to God. After declaring God’s call to repentance and the restoration obedience would bring, Zechariah unveiled in chapters 9–14 a hope-filled, divine plan—a promise that stretched far beyond their immediate horizon and wildest dreams.

Key Concept: God will provide a messianic King who will restore and save His people.

DAILY READINGS

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 1: Haggai 1–2 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 4: Zechariah 7–8 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 2: Zechariah 1–3 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 5: Zechariah 9–14 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 3: Zechariah 4–6 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 6: Psalm 2 |

The promised messianic King will be righteous and humble, riding on a donkey
(Zechariah 9:9-13).



Scan this QR code to access this session's Scripture passages.

⁹ Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout in triumph, Daughter Jerusalem! Look, your King is coming to you; he is righteous and victorious, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. ¹⁰ I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the horse from Jerusalem. The bow of war will be removed, and he will proclaim peace to the nations. His dominion will extend from sea to sea, from the Euphrates River to the ends of the earth. ¹¹ As for you, because of the blood of your covenant, I will release your prisoners from the waterless cistern. ¹² Return to a stronghold, you prisoners who have hope; today I declare that I will restore double to you. ¹³ For I will bend Judah as my bow; I will fill that bow with Ephraim. I will rouse your sons, Zion, against your sons, Greece. I will make you like a warrior's sword.

Notes

The King Is Coming

Zechariah 9 begins the first of two major oracles of chapters 9–14. The oracle in Zechariah 9 stretches all the way to 11:17, and it contains prophecy concerning leaders and the people whom they were to serve. Zechariah's prophecy spoke about the King subduing His enemies and setting up His reign in Jerusalem. Zechariah 9:1-8 described how the Lord will judge the nations around Jerusalem. The Lord is seen as the divine warrior who will bring judgment to those who seek to oppress His people. This coming King is righteous, victorious, and humble.

Zechariah 9:9 commanded Daughter Zion—a poetic name for Jerusalem—to “rejoice greatly” and

FIGURE Study

ZECHARIAH:

The prophet Zechariah served the Lord during the time when the temple was being rebuilt. The book of Nehemiah also identified him as the head of the priestly family of Iddo (Neh. 12:16). Along with Haggai, Zechariah encouraged the people with prophecies as they called them to rebuild the temple (Ezra 5:1; 6:14). Zechariah's name means "Yahweh has remembered," a fitting name considering his message of restoration and hope for the returning exiles.

"shout in triumph." Why should the people rejoice and shout with praise? The answer is one of hope: "Your king is coming to you" (Zech. 9:9). The King of kings secured His people's protection in verses 1-8, now He would come to Jerusalem. The King conquered Israel's enemies and now His triumphal entry would be proclaimed as He entered Jerusalem. For the Jewish people who had gone through exile, this would have been good news.

God had promised King David that if his sons obeyed God's covenant, he would always have a son to sit on the throne, culminating in one Son who would reign forever (2 Sam. 7:13-16). The wisest of David's sons, Solomon, allowed his foreign wives to lure him away from worshiping the Lord, so God split the kingdom and took the majority of it from him (1 Kings 11:9-13). The final three kings of Judah from the house of David were wicked and refused to listen to God's prophets, and they were taken captive by foreign kings (see 2 Kings 24). Yet God preserved Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, a descendant of King David through King Jeconiah, and he became the governor of Judah after the exile (1 Chron. 3:17-19; Hag. 1:1). Though Zechariah encouraged Zerubbabel, he was not the promised king that Zechariah was speaking about.

Not only was the King described as having conquered the enemies around Jerusalem and bringing safety to the people there, but He also was described as "righteous and victorious" (Zech. 9:9). Unlike the kings who had ruled over Jerusalem and led the people further into idolatry, this King would be righteous. Don't you long for rulers who rule justly and rightly?

On this side of the New Testament, we know that this prophesied King is the Lord Jesus Christ. In fact,

when Jesus entered Jerusalem the week before His crucifixion, all four Gospel writers explained how Jesus's entrance fulfilled Zechariah 9 (Matt. 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:28-44; John 12:12-19). Jesus not only rules rightly and justly, but He is justice and righteousness personified. Jesus is the perfectly righteous King, reigning in holiness. Jesus alone could fulfill the law's righteous demands.

Zechariah also described this King as "victorious" (Zech. 9:9). The Hebrew word means "to save." This word carries with it the idea that the King experienced victory or that He brought victory for other people, or it could be a combination of both. When it comes to the work of Jesus Christ, we understand that Jesus gained victory over sin and death, and this victory was then given to all those who place their faith in Him as their Savior.

This promised King is also "humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Zech. 9:9). In the ancient Near East, when a king went into a city to conquer, he would ride in on a warhorse. When a king rode into a city peacefully, he would ride on a donkey. So many kings throughout history were known for their pride and arrogance, but this King entering Jerusalem was far different.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey the week before His death and resurrection, He entered not as a political revolutionary to overthrow the Roman Empire, yet, but as One who would humble Himself to death on the cross to bring salvation to His people. Jesus is truly the King unlike any other king. Jesus will not bring about a temporary peace that will one day be no more. No, Jesus brings an eternal peace where God and sinner are reconciled. Therefore, we

should rejoice greatly because of the work that He has done as our King!

Why is the King's humility such a unique characteristic to highlight?

The King Brings Freedom

While verse 9 was fulfilled in Jesus's first coming, the following verses describe much of what will happen at Jesus's second coming. Jesus's kingship here on earth has not fully arrived but will be here fully at His second coming. In verses 10 and 13, Zechariah mentioned Jerusalem, Judah, and Ephraim. These geographical markers indicate that there will be a reunion of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms under the King. The unification will ultimately take place in the hearts and lives of those who are "one in Christ."

Notice how the King will also remove war: "The bow of war will be removed, and he will proclaim peace to the nations" (Zech. 9:10). Can you imagine a world without war and hate? What a wonderful place that will be. Not only will there be an absence of war, but there will be "peace to the nations." This is a true and lasting peace, not simply a temporary cease-fire. There will be peace because when Jesus returns, He will set all wrongs to right and there will be no more sin (Rev. 21:4). This peaceful rule will extend "from sea to sea, and from the Euphrates River to the ends of the earth" (Zech. 9:10). This will not be a localized peace but a worldwide peace. Instead of having world wars, we will truly have world peace.

How will this peace come about? It will come about through "the blood of your covenant" (v. 11). The Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants were ratified with

blood. When covenants were written, sacrifices were offered to display the consequences for breaking the covenant. Zechariah's words point us forward to the new covenant that Jesus initiated through the shedding of His blood on the cross. When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, He said of the cup, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" (Luke 22:20).

This shedding of blood will bring about freedom. As the blood of the covenant is shed, the King will "release your prisoners from the waterless cistern" (Zech. 9:11). This waterless cistern was an empty cistern used as a prison. For those whom God saves, when they place their faith in Jesus as their Savior, they are released from the bondage of sin and death. This King has not come just to establish world peace but to set us free from the great enemies of sin and death.

Those who trust in Christ are set free to serve the Lord faithfully. This does not mean we no longer struggle with sin and temptation. No, we are set free to serve the Lord, and we must fight against sin and temptation in our lives until we are made complete in glory.

King Jesus provides the wonderful blessings of salvation, peace, and freedom. If you find yourself in need of deliverance from the pit of sin, then you must see Jesus for the King that He is—the King unlike any other king who sets us free from sin and death.

Maybe you find yourself discouraged today; take hope in knowing that Jesus is the righteous, victorious, humble King who gave Himself for you. Maybe you feel like nobody cares about you; do you not see the great length that Christ went to for you? Does it feel like you are trapped in a waterless cistern? Look and see what Christ has done to bring you up out of that pit!

CHRIST **Connection**

Jesus is the coming King riding on a donkey, as prophesied by Zechariah. His peace and dominion will be an everlasting kingdom for those who believe in Him.

What might life look like if God's kingdom ruled in every corner of this earth?

God will defend and save His beloved people through His Messiah-King (Zechariah 9:14-17).

¹⁴ Then the LORD will appear over them, and his arrow will fly like lightning. The Lord GOD will sound the ram's horn and advance with the southern storms. ¹⁵ The LORD of Armies will defend them. They will consume and conquer with slingstones; they will drink and be rowdy as if with wine. They will be as full as the sprinkling basin, like those at the corners of the altar. ¹⁶ The LORD their God will save them on that day as the flock of his people; for they are like jewels in a crown, sparkling over his land. ¹⁷ How lovely and beautiful! Grain will make the young men flourish, and new wine, the young women.

The King Defends His People

The next section of this prophecy concerning the coming Messiah-King now covers His defense of His people and their response to His victory. The images used to describe the Lord's defense of His people are similar to those of a great storm. The Lord's arrows will "fly like lightning" and "the Lord GOD will sound the trumpet and advance with the southern storms" (v. 14). The Lord will protect and defend His people.

As the nations around Israel constantly warred back and forth, the people could take comfort in knowing that God would faithfully preserve them. For those in Christ, we know that God will deliver and defend us. As the world constantly changes around us, we know that we have the constant promise of the Lord to defend and protect His people.

The next image that Zechariah used to describe the Lord's defense of His people is gruesome. The Lord's defense of His people will lead them to "consume and conquer" their enemies (v. 15). The people of God will "be full as the sprinkling basin, like those at the corners of the altar." This graphic image describes the total victory of God's people over their enemies. The language of the sprinkling basin and the corners of the altar is sacrificial language:

The priest is to apply some of the blood to the horns of the altar of fragrant incense that is before the LORD in the tent of meeting. He must pour out the rest of the bull's blood at the base of the altar of burnt offering that is at the entrance to the tent of meeting. (Lev. 4:7)

Here the sin of the enemies of God is being paid through this victorious judgment upon their lives.

Countless people today struggle with the fact that God would judge and punish anyone. But when we come to truly understand our sin against God, we should be shocked that God would save any of us. We all deserve God's righteous wrath against our sins. While God judges and punishes sin, we must also remember that God does not punish unjustly. When it comes to Israel's enemies, they were given countless opportunities to repent, but they did not. Similarly, today we understand that no one is "without excuse" (Rom. 1:20) because God's nature is on display in His creation. Thus, people should turn from sin and seek Christ. Also, we must remember that it is our task to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19). We all have people in our lives who have not come to saving faith in Jesus Christ, and their judgment is coming.

Therefore, we must tell them about the saving work that Christ has done to save sinners!

The fact that God saved and delivered His people allowed them to walk victoriously and to celebrate the work He has done. The people were able to drink and be full. The Lord of Armies acted in their favor; therefore, they are able to celebrate His mighty victory on their behalf.

When was the last time you celebrated what the Lord has done in your life? Why is it so easy for us to forget what God has done? It is because we are so naturally (or sinfully) inclined to turn inward and think about ourselves as the center of the universe. We must remember, like the Israelites here, that God is the One who fights for us. He is the One who delivers and saves. This week, you should take some time and write down all the wondrous works that God has done in your life to save you, care for you, provide for you, and defend you.

What victories has God provided that you can celebrate today?

The King Saves His People

Not only is the Lord described as the defender of His people, but He also saves them. Zechariah said, “The LORD their God will save them on that day” (Zech. 9:16). The phrase “the LORD their God” is a covenantal phrase. When God made a covenant with Abraham, He said, “To you and your future offspring I will give the land where you are residing—all the land of Canaan—as a permanent possession, and I will be their God” (Gen. 17:8). We must remember that God is not some impersonal force or a distant being in the

clouds. The one true God is personal and desires to be known by His people.

The people were described as “the flock” of God (Zech. 9:16). This picture of the flock introduces an important theme of shepherding that will go on for the next few chapters (Zech. 10–13). The picture of God as shepherd occurs throughout the Old Testament. Often Israel’s evil leaders were portrayed as bad shepherds who did not care for their flock (see Ezek. 34). Here God is shown to be the shepherd who saves His people.

Unlike many of the Israelite leaders who cared little for their people as they led them into idolatry, the Lord cares greatly for His flock. For the Lord, His people “are like jewels in a crown, sparkling over his land” (Zech. 9:16). Right before God gave the Ten Commandments, He told the people:

Now if you will carefully listen to me and keep my covenant, you will be my own possession out of all the peoples, although the whole earth is mine, and you will be my kingdom of priests and my holy nation. (Ex. 19:5-6).

Here that commitment and care for His people continues. Despite their unfaithful history, the Lord was committed to His people and cared for them.

The King returning to defend and save His people is a wonderful sight that leads to the celebratory shout “How lovely and beautiful!” (Zech. 9:17). The King in His beauty will lead the people to celebrate His deliverance. The image of grain and wine are symbolic of health and wellness that come with the King’s reign in their lives. Grain and new wine were seen as covenantal blessings. In Moses’s blessings upon the people of Israel near the end of his life, he said, “So Israel

Voices from CHURCH HISTORY

“The Cross was a horrible thing. But when He comes again—oh, how beautiful He will be! We speak of beautiful people in our day, but He is the beautiful one, and He puts His beauty on those who are His own.”¹

—J. Vernon McGee
(1904–1988)

THEOLOGY Connection

CHRIST AS KING:

God has always been King over His creation, whether in heaven or on earth. Yet some of His creatures in both realms have rebelled against Him, leaving destruction in their wake. To restore His broken world, God promised a King who would deliver His people and restore all of creation. The promise of a coming King finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ and looks forward to its perfection when Jesus returns for His bride, the church.

dwells securely; Jacob lives untroubled, in a land of grain and new wine; even his skies drip with dew” (Deut. 33:28). In a similar way, Zechariah gave a picture of God’s salvation.

At the beginning of the book of Zechariah, God said to the people:

This is what the LORD of Armies says: Return to me—this is the declaration of the LORD of Armies—and I will return to you, says the LORD of Armies. Do not be like your ancestors; the earlier prophets proclaimed to them: This is what the LORD of Armies says: Turn from your evil ways and your evil deeds. (Zech. 1:3-4)

God promised that He would return to His people, and in Zechariah 9, we are given this glorious vision of God’s promise coming true through the King riding on a donkey, righteous, victorious, and humble.

The portrait of the Lord of Armies who comes to save His people is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. This wonderful picture of the King in His beauty is revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus, as the Good Shepherd (John 10:1-18), possesses the power to defeat His enemies and care for His flock. His people are His treasured possession, and He blesses those who follow Him.

How have you experienced the tender care of the Good Shepherd lately?

Key Concept: God will provide a messianic King who will restore and save His people.



HEAD

How can we focus on Christ as our King this week and submit to His rule?



HEART

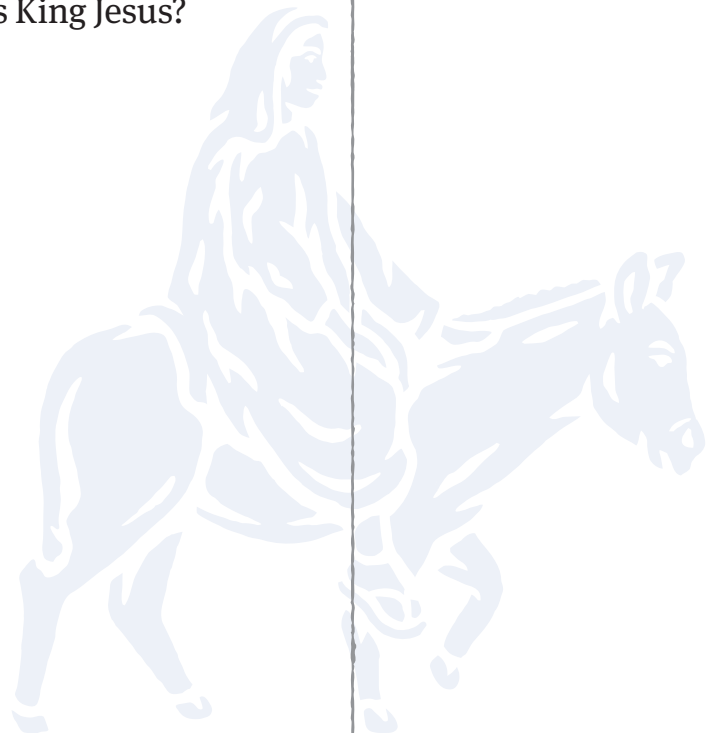
What are some ways we can nurture our relationship with God as both our Conquering King and our Good Shepherd?



HANDS

With whom will you share the good news of our humble, victorious, and righteous King Jesus?

Notes



References

1. J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible Commentary: The Prophets (Zechariah)*, electronic ed., vol. 32 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 134.

THE PEOPLE RESCUED

CORE PASSAGE: ESTHER 3:7-9,13; 8:5,11-13,17

Context: Though many Jews returned to Judah to reclaim and rebuild the way of life that had been lost, many stayed put. The original exiles who had survived the deportations settled in their new home, married, and had children, just as Jeremiah had commanded them (Jer. 29:4-7). Over the seventy years of exile and beyond, generations were born and raised in the foreign lands of Babylon and Persia. But because of the passage of time, these lands no longer seemed so foreign; rather, they had become home. Yet even in these places distant from their homeland, God was watching over His people.

Key Concept: God rescues His people even in the face of imminent destruction.

DAILY READINGS

- ☐ **Day 1:** Esther 1–2
- ☐ **Day 2:** Esther 3
- ☐ **Day 3:** Esther 4–5
- ☐ **Day 4:** Esther 6–7
- ☐ **Day 5:** Esther 8–10
- ☐ **Day 6:** Psalm 71

**Even at the brink of seeming destruction,
God is working among His people**
(Esther 3:7-9,13).

⁷ In the first month, the month of Nisan, in King Ahasuerus's twelfth year, the pur—that is, the lot—was cast before Haman for each day in each month, and it fell on the twelfth month, the month Adar. ⁸ Then Haman informed King Ahasuerus, "There is one ethnic group, scattered throughout the peoples in every province of your kingdom, keeping themselves separate. Their laws are different from everyone else's and they do not obey the king's laws. It is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them." ⁹ If the king approves, let an order be drawn up authorizing their destruction, and I will pay 375 tons of silver to the officials for deposit in the royal treasury." . . . ¹³ Letters were sent by couriers to each of the royal provinces telling the officials to destroy, kill, and annihilate all the Jewish people—young and old, women and children—and plunder their possessions on a single day, the thirteenth day of Adar, the twelfth month.

The Wicked Plot Evil

Does it ever seem as if God were not there? If there ever were a book in the Bible where that would seem like the case, it would be the book of Esther. God's name is not mentioned once in its entirety, which is ten chapters of narrative, dialogue, political intrigue, the threat of genocide, and national vindication. However, all this happened and was recorded for a reason. The book of Esther was written to show how God, even behind the scenes, is in control and sovereign over the everyday events of our lives.



Scan this QR code
to access this session's
Scripture passages.

Notes

Our text in Esther 3 comes from the middle of the Esther narrative after she has been selected as queen by King Ahasuerus. Here Haman, the right-hand man of the king, devised a plot to kill every Jew in the Persian Empire because he hated Mordecai, Esther's cousin and guardian:

When Haman saw that Mordecai was not bowing down or paying him homage, he was filled with rage. And when he learned of Mordecai's ethnic identity, it seemed repugnant to Haman to do away with Mordecai alone. He planned to destroy all of Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout Ahasuerus's kingdom. (Esth. 3:5-6)

Haman sought to destroy Mordecai and all the Jews simply because Mordecai wounded his pride.

Why would Haman hate Mordecai because he was a Jew? Haman was an "Agagite" (v. 1), a descendant of King Agag of the Amalekites. The Amalekites were ancient enemies of the Jews from the time they left Egypt (Ex. 17:8-16), and King Saul, by the command of God, was supposed to wipe them out as a judgment for their violent treatment of God's people (see 1 Sam. 15). This interpersonal conflict between Haman and Mordecai was more than a feud between two men; it was a centuries-long conflict between two people groups on different sides of God's favor.

In the book of Esther, this centuries-long conflict put the lives of all the Jews in peril. These events took place during the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus's reign, which means Haman had years to devise this wicked plot to destroy Mordecai and the Jews.

In his scheming, Haman would cast the *pur*, the Persian word for lots, to receive “divine” guidance, and the lot was cast on the twelfth month of Adar. Haman went to King Ahasuerus and denounced a people group that did not assimilate to the Persian way of life. He said: “Their laws are different from everyone else’s and they do not obey the king’s laws. It is not in the king’s best interest to tolerate them” (Esth. 3:8). Notice that Haman never named the people group that he wanted to destroy, keeping this people anonymous. Haman’s words “best interest” carried the idea of monetary interest. It is very likely the Persian Empire was stressed for money at this time. In Esther 2:18, part of the celebration for Esther becoming queen was King Ahasuerus’s decision to free his provinces from tax payments, likely for a time. Additionally, Persia had been fighting against Greece. Haman was probably hinting at one of the major issues facing the king: How was he going to continue to fund the empire?

Haman’s solution to the empire’s need for money was that he would wipe out this people group costing King Ahasuerus money, and even more, he would pay to have it done (3:9). The amount of silver that Haman promised to pay was incredibly large. It would have been over half the amount of the empire’s tax revenue for the year.¹ Haman’s promise to pay this amount of money was likely an exaggeration, or he considered whatever silver could be received by the plundering of the Jews would go into the king’s treasury as his payment (v. 13).² Haman’s offer for payment for this annihilation may have made him seem like he had the king’s best interest in mind, but the real reason for Haman’s request was his hatred of Mordecai and the Jews.

WORD Study

CASTING LOTS: Lot-casting was a common system of decision-making for ancient peoples. The primary Hebrew word for “lots” (*goral*) refers to small stones cast to produce a decision.³ The Urim and Thummim may have been used similarly, as prescribed by the Lord (Ex. 28:30), to inquire of the Lord (Josh. 18:11; 1 Sam. 14:41-42; Neh. 7:65). It is wise to remember “the lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD” (Prov. 16:33).

THEOLOGY Connection

GOD'S PLAN AND HUMAN ACTION:

God's sovereignty over all of life encompasses the free actions of human beings (Prov. 19:21). In ways we cannot fully comprehend, the Lord's plan goes forward through the choices of human beings as moral agents. Even freely chosen sinful actions are factored into God's overarching plan, as is the case with the crucifixion of Jesus—an event both purposed by God through foreknowledge and yet also carried out by the wicked decisions of human beings (Acts 2:23). (cont.)

Sadly, the king did not ask any further questions. He simply gave Haman his signet ring in order to make this decree across the empire. King Ahasuerus was not known in history for his high regard of human life, but it was incredibly reckless for a king to make a murderous decree without knowing the full story. King Ahasuerus thought only of the money that this extermination would bring him. With an entire people group's lives on the line, the king did not even ask who would be exterminated. He simply told the evil Haman to go and do as he saw fit (v. 11). Instead of the king using wisdom and discernment to rule justly, he allowed his greed and the influence of a wicked man to sway his decision.

This hatred by Haman should shock us regarding how easy it was for him to seek to destroy the Jews, but this problem also continues today. As we think about the Holocaust and various genocides that have been attempted over the decades, we dare not think that this cannot happen again. Think about the great tragedy of abortion and how countless babies' lives have been ended by the permission of "proclamations" by earthly governments. Just as the ancient enemy was at work through Haman here, trying to extinguish any hope of a messianic "seed" coming from the woman (Gen. 3:13), he is still at work in the horrific acts of violence we see today. As followers of Jesus Christ, we must stand up for the voiceless. We cannot be like Ahasuerus and wipe our hands of the situation. God has given us a voice, so let us speak with moral courage.

Why do you think God allows hatred and harm for His people?

The Wicked Decree Evil

Instead of acting justly and protecting the peoples he was ruling over, the king allowed the proclamation to go forth that the Jews would be wiped out. The king's decree spread throughout the empire, translated into every language. Haman's demonic plan of destruction had been set in motion.

This decree was written “exactly as Haman commanded” (Esth. 3:12) for the officials to destroy all the Jewish people, “young and old, women and children—and plunder their possessions on a single day, the thirteenth day of Adar, the twelfth month” (v. 13). The empire had an entire year to plan the destruction of the Jews. Can you imagine what it would have been like to have been a Jew during that time, having an entire year to think about your destruction and being powerless to do anything about it?

Verse 15 describes what happened once this decree went out to the entire empire: “The king and Haman sat down to drink, while the city of Susa was in confusion.” Not everyone in the empire was in favor of this destructive decree. While there was confusion in the city over this decree, the king was completely ignorant to the devastation he just caused. Instead of ruling with justice and righteousness on his mind, he ruled with money and drink on his mind.

Though it may seem that God is not present or working, He always is. God had already raised up Esther to the position of queen to speak on behalf of His people.

How has God prepared you for particular opportunities or seasons you didn't see coming?

Notes

THEOLOGY Connection

(cont.) 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.



Bonus Content

Scan this QR code to see how God is at work in Esther's story, even if His name is never mentioned.

God carries out His purposes of rescue and deliverance (Esther 8:5,11-13,17).

⁵ She said, “If it pleases the king and I have found favor with him, if the matter seems right to the king and I am pleasing in his eyes, let a royal edict be written. Let it revoke the documents the scheming Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the king’s provinces. . . .¹¹ The king’s edict gave the Jews in each and every city the right to assemble and defend themselves, to destroy, kill, and annihilate every ethnic and provincial army hostile to them, including women and children, and to take their possessions as spoils of war. ¹² This would take place on a single day throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month Adar. ¹³ A copy of the text, issued as law throughout every province, was distributed to all the peoples so the Jews could be ready to avenge themselves against their enemies on that day. . . .¹⁷ In every province and every city where the king’s command and edict reached, gladness and joy took place among the Jews. There was a celebration and a holiday. And many of the ethnic groups of the land professed themselves to be Jews because fear of the Jews had overcome them.

God’s People Act

God was not absent or distant in this story. God always orchestrates events for His glory and His people’s good. While Haman sought to annihilate the Jews, God was using his decree to cause the Jews to look to Him once again for rescue and deliverance.

In Esther 4, Mordecai revealed to Esther Haman’s plot to destroy the Jews, and he urged her to intervene

on behalf of their people (4:8). But that would be easier said than done. No one could approach the king without being summoned or that person would be executed, unless the king extended his scepter and pardoned the person. Add to that barrier that the king had not summoned Esther in thirty days (v. 11). Mordecai warned her that being in the palace would not allow her to escape this judgment in the end (v. 13). He said:

If you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will come to the Jewish people from another place, but you and your father's family will be destroyed. Who knows, perhaps you have come to your royal position for such a time as this. (v. 14)

So Esther asked Mordecai and the Jewish people to fast on her behalf for three days (v. 15). Then she said: "After that, I will go to the king even if it is against the law. If I perish, I perish" (v. 16).

Esther did risk her life for the salvation of her people. Eventually she revealed Haman's plot to the king and revealed her heritage as a Jew (7:3-4). The king executed Haman on the very gallows he built for Mordecai (v. 10). The king also gave Esther the house of Haman and the dead official's signet ring to Mordecai (8:1-2). However, Esther's work intervening for her people was not over yet.

Although Haman's plot has been revealed and the king acted to save Esther's life, the rest of the Jews still needed protection. Esther begged the king to write a royal edict to provide for their protection by revoking the edict inspired by Haman (v. 5).

WORD Study

FAVOR: The Hebrew word *chen* means “favor” or “grace.” “King Xerxes looked with ‘favor’ upon Esther, the new Jewish queen. But the reader knows that God is behind the perception of King Xerxes.”⁴

Favor is a means of appreciation, approval, preference, or acceptance. Christ said He came to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor (Luke 4:18-21; cf. Isa. 61:1-4).

The king informed Esther that the previous edict could not be overruled, but he could create a new edict, and as he had done previously with Haman, he entrusted this task, along with his signet ring, to Mordecai and Esther. The new edict was written by Mordecai and sent out to the rest of the empire. This edict was sent out two months after the first decree to destroy the Jews (v. 9). In it, the Jews were given “the right to assemble and defend themselves, to destroy, kill, and annihilate every ethnic and provincial army hostile to them” (v. 11).

Notice that while God’s name was never mentioned in this narrative, He was still ruling and reigning over all. God was orchestrating these events so that His people would see His deliverance and praise Him (vv. 16-17). Think about all the events that “just so happened” to happen in Esther so that she would be put in this place to intercede on behalf of her people’s salvation. Queen Vashti disobeyed the king and was banished (ch. 1), leading to Esther being chosen as queen (ch. 2). Esther went to the king and gained favor with him (5:2). The king couldn’t sleep the night before her second banquet, and he realized he had not honored Mordecai for saving his life (ch. 6). Esther then revealed the plot of Haman to destroy her people, and the king destroyed his adviser (ch. 7). Did all these events “just happen” by chance? No, God was at work in Esther’s life, putting her in that palace and giving her favor with a pagan king “for such a time as this” (4:14).

How have you experienced the unmerited favor of God in your life?

God's People Trust Him

While the Jews would have legal protection to fight back against any enemies, they would have to wait another nine months before that day would arrive. They needed to trust God and act. Mordecai acted on behalf of the people to write the royal edict of protection. Not only would the people be able to defend themselves, but the edict stated that they could “take their possessions as spoils of war” (8:12). A copy of this edict would be sent out to the entire empire.

As this edict spread throughout the empire, “in every province and every city where the king’s command and edict reached, gladness and joy took place among the Jews. There was a celebration and a holiday” (v. 17). Eventually this edict would lead to the Jewish holiday of Purim. Where there had been confusion, sorrow, and fear, there was now gladness, joy, and honor because the Lord acted through Esther to save the Jewish people.

The reversal of this edict also led many of the ethnic groups of the land to profess themselves to be Jews “because fear of the Jews had overcome them” (v. 17). The authority of Mordecai and the favor that the Jews now possessed caused people to fear for their lives. It is likely that their “profession” was simply a way to try and preserve their lives. Genuine repentance involves turning from sin and trusting the Lord to save. We must be clear that when we call people to trust in Christ as their Lord and Savior, they must do so because they truly recognize what the Lord has done on their behalf and desire to praise Him.

These events did not happen by chance! Similarly, there is no event that happens in our lives as a mere

GOSPEL Connection

God remains true to His covenant in having a people for Himself and will provide a way to trust in Him. This was true for Esther, even in a foreign land, and it is true for believers today who trust in Jesus to rescue us from sin and death.

result of chance. God governs all. At the same time, knowing that God is governing and in control of all things doesn't mean we just sit back and do nothing. Did Esther just sit there and do nothing? No! She had to go before the king to save her people. She had to risk her life to save her people. Though she was hesitant at first, ultimately she did as Mordecai told her. She risked the threat of punishment and death to intercede for her people.

Esther points us to another leader who did not just risk His life to save His people but laid down His life. The Lord Jesus Christ gave His life to save His people. Esther went before the king knowing, "If I perish, I perish," even though initially, she was fearful. Jesus came to this earth knowing that He would have to die to save sinners. Even though He did pray that God would take that burden from Him, He knew He would obey either way (Matt. 26:36-46). He knew God's plan would come to fruition, and He submitted to the will of the Father. Ultimately, Jesus did not cower in fear but marched to the cross to save us from our sins.

In both narratives, in both cases, God was sovereign over all of it, though we, as humans, have free will and our part to play in obeying and submitting to His will. God's plan will always happen according to His will and purposes. No one can thwart the plan of God. Even in the dimmest of light, even when it doesn't seem like God is present, He is. He is at work always for our good and His glory.

What characteristics of God stand out to you as clearly displayed in the book of Esther?

Key Concept: God rescues His people even in the face of imminent destruction.



HEAD

What verses could we memorize this week to help us remember God's power and sovereignty?



HEART

How might a better grasp of God's favor and providence affect your peace?



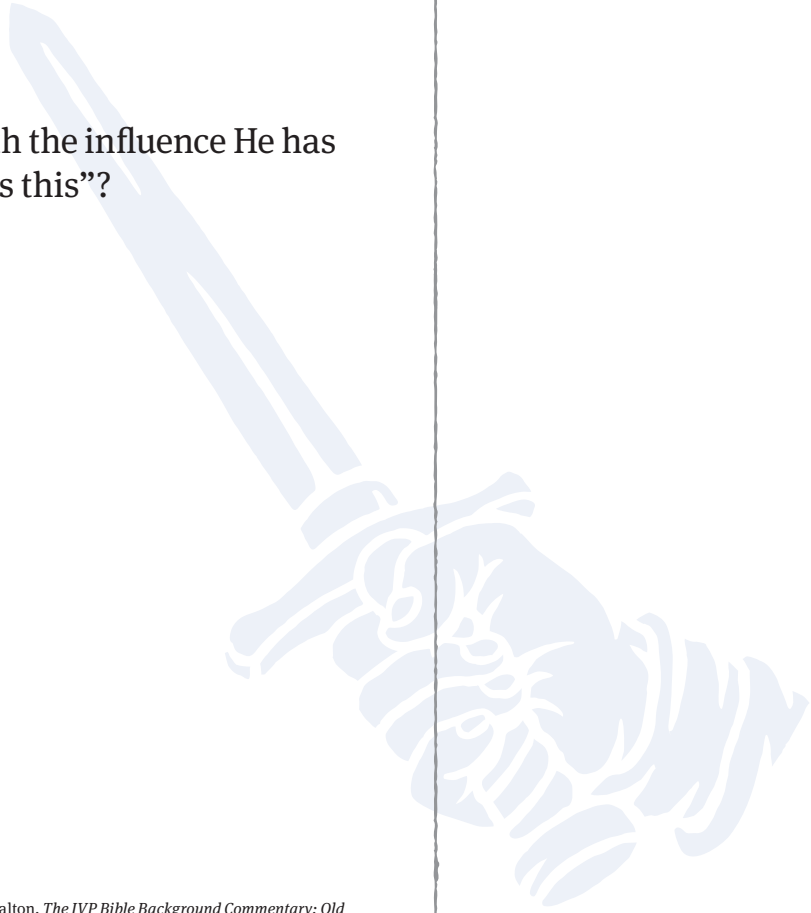
HANDS

How will you honor God with the influence He has given you "for such a time as this"?

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Notes



THE GOSPEL PROJECT

UNIT 18

GOD IN THE RETURN



NEHEMIAH; MALACHI; LUKE



MEMORY VERSES

“Look, the day is coming, burning like a furnace, when all the arrogant and everyone who commits wickedness will become stubble. The coming day will consume them,’ says the LORD of Armies, ‘not leaving them root or branches. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings, and you will go out and playfully jump like calves from the stall.’”

—Malachi 4:1-2



THE WALL REBUILT

CORE PASSAGE: NEHEMIAH 1:5-11; 6:2-9,15-16

Context: The book of Nehemiah opens in late fall, early winter of 446 or 445 BC. Nehemiah was an Israelite living in exile who had been appointed to be the king's cupbearer, a highly honored role that allowed him close access to the king. Nehemiah was in Susa, a royal fortress city of the Medo-Persian Empire, located in modern-day Iran. There, Nehemiah received a troubling report from the Israelites who had returned to the land as God promised, and he prayed for the opportunity to do something about it.

Key Concept: God restores His people when they repent so that the world would know He is God.

DAILY READINGS

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 1: Ezra 4:6-23 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 4: Nehemiah 1:1-3:32 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 2: Ezra 7:1-8:36 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 5: Nehemiah 4:1-6:19 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 3: Ezra 9:1-10:44 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 6: Psalm 41 |

With repentance comes restoration
(Nehemiah 1:5-11).

⁵ I said, LORD, the God of the heavens, the great and awe-inspiring God who keeps his gracious covenant with those who love him and keep his commands, ⁶ let your eyes be open and your ears be attentive to hear your servant's prayer that I now pray to you day and night for your servants, the Israelites. I confess the sins we have committed against you. Both I and my father's family have sinned. ⁷ We have acted corruptly toward you and have not kept the commands, statutes, and ordinances you gave your servant Moses. ⁸ Please remember what you commanded your servant Moses: "If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples. ⁹ But if you return to me and carefully observe my commands, even though your exiles were banished to the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place where I chose to have my name dwell." ¹⁰ They are your servants and your people. You redeemed them by your great power and strong hand. ¹¹ Please, LORD, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant and to that of your servants who delight to revere your name. Give your servant success today, and grant him compassion in the presence of this man. At the time, I was the king's cupbearer.

Nehemiah Prayed

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah (which may have first been composed as one book) cover roughly a one-hundred-year time span of Israel a few centuries before Christ's birth. At the time, Israel had been under the rule of foreign nations for seventy years. As a result, their identity as a nation was in shambles. As



Scan this QR code
to access this session's
Scripture passages.

Notes

THEOLOGY Connection

REPENTANCE:

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

their nation had been dismantled, their optimism had vanished, and the people were in disarray. To put it as simply as possible, the situation was desperate.

Yet there is a subtle hint of hope from the very beginning of the book of Nehemiah. The name Nehemiah means "the LORD comforts." That is not just a coincidence. In ancient times, people's names spoke to their purpose or destiny. Thus, Nehemiah's presence among the people reminds us that God comforts His people even in discipline. That is good news for dependent and often desperate people. Israel needed comfort, and God sent them Nehemiah.

As the book opens, Nehemiah learned from his brother Hanani that the group of Israelites in Jerusalem were in deep distress. Jerusalem and its wall were in ruins, and because of that, the people were vulnerable to the enemies around them. With this distressing news, it shouldn't surprise us that the book of Nehemiah begins with prayer and a call to repentance.

Prayer is to faith as breath is to life.¹ But why do we only turn to fervent prayer when the wind is knocked out of us? Desperation is one of the most effective means of bringing us to dependency on God in prayer. In reality, we are always dependent on God. And by His grace, through our repentance, He rebuilds us.

When Nehemiah received the report from his brother, he wept and mourned, fasted, and prayed day and night for several days. When was the last time you wept over the condition of God's people? When was the last time you mourned over the brokenness of our world? As a man whom God called to help His people, Nehemiah was moved by his task. Ministry is difficult because people are sinful. Ministry is difficult because the world is dark. Here we see Nehemiah responding

not unlike our Lord, who wept over Jerusalem for its poor spiritual condition (Neh. 1:4; cf. Luke 19:41-44).

What is your first reaction when you hear distressing news?

After hearing the news, Nehemiah didn't just mourn for Jerusalem; he was a man of action who set his hands to work out a solution. But before ever setting his hands to work, he folded his hands in prayer and fasting for four months. Let that sink in: he prayed and fasted for four months before doing anything. Imagine if when faced with a problem, a leader said, "Let's pray and fast about this for four months before we do anything." In our fast-paced world, we tend to think that leaders get things done, jumping from one project to the next. Instead of crying out to God and expecting Him to work, we often rally the troops, gather resources, and do the work ourselves. The problem is, for many of us, prayer is the last resort and not our first response.

We understand that prayer changes things. But we often forget how prayer changes us. Nehemiah didn't begin his prayer with pleading but with praise: "LORD, the God of the heavens, the great and awe-inspiring God who keeps his gracious covenant with those who love him and keep his commands" (Neh. 1:5). Nehemiah put his thoughts beyond his circumstances. He understood that God is the One who supersedes and is uniquely beyond this world and its problems. As Deuteronomy 4:7 reminds us, "What great nation is there that has a god near to it as the LORD our God is to us whenever we call to him?"

Even more, Nehemiah recognized that God is immanent. That is, while He is transcendent, He also draws

near to His people and keeps His promises to them. The God of heaven is the personal covenant-keeping, steadfast, and loving God of His children on earth.

Our faith is grounded in who God is. God is faithful to His people. And like Nehemiah's prayer, our prayers must be based on God's revealed character. Prayer, then, should appeal to God's mercy based on a knowledge of His merciful character. This was why Nehemiah began with praise.

Nehemiah Confessed

Notice in the prayer that Nehemiah confessed his sins and those of his people to begin the restoration process. Nehemiah was not even alive when the sin that led to the exile began, but he confessed to participating in it because of his solidarity with the people of Judah. Not only was he a participant, but he was also guilty: "Both I and my father's family have sinned" (Neh. 1:6). Too often we approach our spiritual lives with the individualistic focus our Western culture has instructed us to have. But the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 12:26 teaches us that "if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it."

The word "confess" means casting something down and throwing it away. The point is that there is no justification for concealing sin. True, godly confession has no excuses or rationalizations; it's an honest appraisal of wrongs that we have done. When God reveals sin in our lives, it is an act of mercy and grace. The same God faithful in carrying out His judgment is also faithful in reconciling and restoring His people. Notice that in 1:10, Nehemiah recalled that Israel was "redeemed" by God. The verb employed here is the strongest

possible affirmation that a ransom price had been paid on their behalf. It's as if Nehemiah was saying, "God, You cannot abandon Your people without going back on Your word, without denying Yourself."

After praising God for who He is and confessing sin, Nehemiah then turned to God's promises. Nehemiah rehearsed Israel's history in light of God's promises. He remembered Deuteronomy 4:25-27:

If you . . . do what is evil in the sight of the LORD your God, angering him, I call heaven and earth as witnesses . . . The LORD will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be reduced to a few survivors among the nations where the LORD your God will drive you.

Thanks be to God, Deuteronomy doesn't end with God's warnings and foreshadowings of chapters 28–29. Nehemiah went on to remember Deuteronomy 30:1-4:

When all these things happen to you—the blessings and curses I have set before you—and you come to your senses while you are in all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you, and you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and all your soul . . . then he will restore your fortunes, have compassion on you, and gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you. Even if your exiles are at the farthest horizon, he will gather you and bring you back from there.

Nehemiah was calling on God to enact His promises and redeem His people by His power (Neh. 1:8,10). Aren't you thankful that God is faithful even when we

WORD Study

REMEMBER: The Hebrew word *zakar* is a verb meaning "to remember, to mention, to recall, to think about, to acknowledge, to make known."² Throughout the book that bears his name, Nehemiah asked God to remember His covenant for His glory (Neh. 1:8). He also encouraged the people to remember God's goodness and faithfulness in the past (4:14; 9:17). Believers today remember God's mercy shown to us in Christ, and it spurs us to loving obedience.



Bonus Content

Scan this QR code to see how God sometimes allows His people to find favor with non-believers in order to do His will.



are not? Aren't you grateful that the effectiveness of your prayers is not based on your faithfulness but on God's? This is the benefit of allowing our prayers to arise from reflection on God's Word.

In a posture of humility, Nehemiah praised and professed, and then he pleaded: "Please, Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant . . . Give your servant success today, and grant him compassion in the presence of this man" (v. 11). Nehemiah came to God so that God would grant him success and compassion in the presence of King Artaxerxes.

At the time, Nehemiah was the king's cupbearer, his most trusted servant and official. Nehemiah oversaw the king's food services to ensure his meals were not poisoned. He often was by the king's side for counsel. Nehemiah's request could be met with favor or looked upon with suspicion. The "ask" could have poisoned their relationship from then on out. The request could have led to Nehemiah's death. Nehemiah relied on God here as well, for he understood, as Proverbs 21:1 makes so clear: "A king's heart is like channeled water in the LORD's hand: He directs it wherever he chooses."

God not only moved in the heart of Nehemiah but providentially put Nehemiah in the proper place so that he could accomplish his purposes (Neh. 1:1,11). Nehemiah would be asking, in effect, that he might be used in some way to help the cause of God's kingdom, not Artaxerxes's. Nehemiah was preparing to leverage his position on behalf of his people and ultimately for God's exaltation. It was time to rebuild the wall. It was time to rebuild the people.

When have you faced consequences for your sin, and how did the Lord lead you back to Him?

God will restore His people to reveal His glory and sovereignty (Nehemiah 6:2-9,15-16).

Notes

² Sanballat and Geshem sent me a message: “Come, let’s meet together in the villages of the Ono Valley.” They were planning to harm me. ³ So I sent messengers to them, saying, “I am doing important work and cannot come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it and go down to you?” ⁴ Four times they sent me the same proposal, and I gave them the same reply. ⁵ Sanballat sent me this same message a fifth time by his aide, who had an open letter in his hand. ⁶ In it was written: It is reported among the nations—and Geshem agrees—that you and the Jews plan to rebel. This is the reason you are building the wall. According to these reports, you are to become their king ⁷ and have even set up the prophets in Jerusalem to proclaim on your behalf, “There is a king in Judah.” These rumors will be heard by the king. So come, let’s confer together. ⁸ Then I replied to him, “There is nothing to these rumors you are spreading; you are inventing them in your own mind.” ⁹ For they were all trying to intimidate us, saying, “They will drop their hands from the work, and it will never be finished.” But now, my God, strengthen my hands. . . . ¹⁵ The wall was completed in fifty-two days, on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul. ¹⁶ When all our enemies heard this, all the surrounding nations were intimidated and lost their confidence, for they realized that this task had been accomplished by our God.

Nehemiah Faced Opposition

Opposition is common in leadership. Leaders need sharp minds to anticipate obstacles in the path ahead. Leaders need tender hearts to discern God’s will. Leaders need tough hides to persevere amid opposition.

The key is learning how to toughen your hide without hardening your heart. Remaining focused on God's call can be difficult. But it's necessary to lead through difficult times. If leaders cannot stay focused on the task in front of them, then they will be distracted from the mission God has given them.

In 6:1-2, three named officials, amongst many others, opposed Nehemiah. The three officials were "greatly displeased" with Nehemiah's aims (2:10) and charged Nehemiah with "rebellious against the king" (v. 19). The three were: (1) Sanballat, the governor of Syria (northwest of Judah); (2) Tobiah, a government official in Ammon (northeast of Judah); and (3) Geshem the Arab, who was from Moab and/or Edom (southeast of Judah). As Jerusalem grew in strength, these three men would lose power and control in the region. In chapter 6, as they realized the wall was nearing completion, they made a last-ditch effort to stop the work by going after Nehemiah personally. If they took down Nehemiah, they would take down the work.

First, they attempted to isolate Nehemiah from his allies by inviting him to the plain of Ono, 27 miles from the city. Nehemiah, however, discerned their intent to harm him (6:2). He was not one to be lured by the guise of false friendship, a common ploy of the wicked.³ Nehemiah said, "I cannot come down" (v. 3). Ono was geographically closer to sea level than Jerusalem, but this language may have signaled that Nehemiah would not let these opponents bring *him* down. When we are focused on God's high calling, some things can be a distraction to bring us down or take us away from what God has called us to do.

Unable to draw Nehemiah away from the work site, Sanballat sent him a message with a juicy rumor:

It is reported among the nations—and Geshem agrees—that you and the Jews plan to rebel. . . . According to these reports, you are to become their king and have even set up the prophets in Jerusalem to proclaim on your behalf, “There is a king in Judah.” These rumors will be heard by the king. So come, let’s confer together. (6:6-7)

This time, Sanballat decided to incite fear in Nehemiah that these false reports of insurrection would get back to Persia and anger King Artaxerxes. These accusations were serious because the Israelites had a history of rebelling against kings (2 Kings 24:1,20). It also was tricky for kingdoms like Persia to control everyone in their empire. Remember, the best threats are plausible because they legitimize the potential of worst-case scenarios. But Nehemiah’s response to their absurd accusation was beautiful: “There is nothing to these rumors you are spreading; you are inventing them in your own mind” (Neh. 6:8).

A letter in Nehemiah’s day usually would be sealed so that the message could only be read by the intended recipient. Yet this was an “open letter” (v. 5), indicating Sanballat wanted to spread these insinuations to everyone. But Nehemiah confronted Sanballat, recognizing his attempt to turn the people against him.

What are some ways Christians can respond confidently and graciously to intimidation or false accusations?

Nehemiah Trusted in God

One of the most challenging things to do in life is to ignore people who slander us. It takes great wisdom to know when or how to respond. Nehemiah understood

Voices from CHURCH HISTORY

*“Unless I am
convicted by
Scripture and
plain reason
. . . my conscience
is captive to the
Word of God.”⁴
—Martin Luther
(1485–1546)*

GOSPEL
Connection

Restoring and returning the Israelites back to Jerusalem reflects God's heart in wanting to be with His people. God also is in the work of restoration in our lives today as we choose to repent and believe in His Son, Jesus Christ. And when we sin and repent, He restores our fellowship with Him.

that Sanballat's attempts to intimidate him were another way the enemy would distract him from the main work God had called him to do. Nehemiah had nothing to gain from granting their request. Instead, he prayed, "But now, my God, strengthen my hands" (v. 9). This is the response every believer should have when the evil one attempts to frighten us from obediently following the will of God. Nehemiah knew he was doing what was right, but he also knew he could not stand in his own strength. As a result of his dependence on God, the work was finished (v. 15).

The work on the wall was completed in 52 days in the face of opposition. The enemies attempted to strike fear in God's people, but in the end, God struck fear in the enemy (v. 16). The word translated "confidence," which the enemies lost because of the wall's completion, has the metaphorical idea of "in their own eyes," the eyes being a person's innermost being. In other words, they had built themselves up by tearing others down. But now, their pride deflated because they realized God was behind the work they desperately tried to stop. When God is at work, unbelief trembles.

The work on the wall may seem paradoxical. The task "had been accomplished by our God" (v. 16) for He is sovereign. But the people worked with diligence for they were called to obey (2:18). The people's obedience to God's command was met with God's sovereign blessing. When the work was done, it was evident who had allowed it to happen. The enemy stood no chance against God's power and His people's obedience.

How can you be faithful to God's call in this season, even if someone or something opposes you?

Key Concept: God restores His people when they repent so that the world would know He is God.



HEAD

Why is it important that we turn to God before acting or reacting to troubling events?



HEART

How can you, like Nehemiah, rest in the Lord's continuing faithfulness?



HANDS

How will you reflect Nehemiah's and Christ's examples of humility and faithfulness this week?

Notes



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THE LAW TAUGHT

CORE PASSAGE: NEHEMIAH 8:2-12

Context: After completing the wall around Jerusalem, Nehemiah established measures around the city to protect them from their opponents (Neh. 7:1-4). He then reiterated the initial census of returnees recorded in Ezra 2 (Neh. 7:5-73a) with the intention of repopulating Jerusalem (7:4-5) and renewing their covenant with God (8:1). To do this, Ezra read the Torah—the first five books of the Bible written by Moses—to the people. The Torah contained the Israelites’ history, God’s covenant with them, the covenant stipulations, and God’s promised blessings and curses.

Key Concept: Scripture should lead us to worship, repent, and celebrate.

DAILY READINGS

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 1: Nehemiah 7:1-4 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 4: Nehemiah 8:4-12 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 2: Nehemiah 7:5-73a | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 5: Nehemiah 8:13-18 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 3: Nehemiah 7:73b-8:3 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 6: Psalm 119 |

God's Word should lead us toward worship
(Nehemiah 8:2-6).

² On the first day of the seventh month, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly of men, women, and all who could listen with understanding. ³ While he was facing the square in front of the Water Gate, he read out of it from daybreak until noon before the men, the women, and those who could understand. All the people listened attentively to the book of the law. ⁴ The scribe Ezra stood on a high wooden platform made for this purpose. Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah stood beside him on his right; to his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam. ⁵ Ezra opened the book in full view of all the people, since he was elevated above everyone. As he opened it, all the people stood up. ⁶ Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and with their hands uplifted all the people said, "Amen, Amen!" Then they knelt low and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

The People Gathered in Jerusalem

God helped the returning exiles rebuild the walls and gates around Jerusalem so that, by Nehemiah 8, the city was now secure. In Nehemiah 7, Nehemiah took steps to strengthen the city's population and infrastructure so that it would flourish. He started with appointing key people at the city gates to control who and what came in and who and what went out (7:2-3). Nehemiah instructed the people to shut the gates and guard the city in its most vulnerable times, thus making it secure and safe.



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Then Nehemiah stated that God put it on his heart to list the names of all those who had already returned from exile who had formerly lived in Jerusalem but now lived in the surrounding area so “that he might bring them back . . . to come and rebuild the houses in Jerusalem and dwell in them.”¹ With slight differences between the accountings in Ezra 2 (c. 538 BC) and Nehemiah 7 (c. 445 BC), what’s striking about the list was the focus on temple worship. It also should be noted that the households gave to the temple so that the priests could be in full-time ministry and dedicate themselves fully to the temple (vv. 70-72).

In Nehemiah 8:1, the people gathered as one people and nation at the Water Gate in the recently rebuilt wall. This gate was on the east side of the temple complex and was named after its proximity to the springs used to bring water into the temple for ritual cleansing. All these events in Nehemiah 8 were prescribed in Deuteronomy 31:10-13:

At the end of every seven years, at the appointed time in the year of debt cancellation, during the Festival of Shelters, when all Israel assembles in the presence of the LORD your God at the place he chooses, you are to read this law aloud before all Israel. Gather the people—men, women, dependents, and the resident aliens within your city gates—so that they may listen and learn to fear the LORD your God and be careful to follow all the words of this law. Then their children who do not know the law will listen and learn to fear the LORD your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess.

The first day of the seventh month, as identified in 8:2, was far from accidental for the events that followed. This was the first day of their new year—a fresh start that corresponded with the month their ancestors were led out of slavery in Egypt. All the people gathered together in Jerusalem. It’s tough to appreciate the unity of God’s people until one has experienced disunity and division. In much of Israel’s history, God’s people were divided more than they were united. Unity among the people of God is a goal of the church:

Now I urge you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree in what you say, that there be no divisions among you, and that you be united with the same understanding and conviction. (1 Cor. 1:10)

The phrase “the people” is used fifteen times in this passage. Nehemiah pointed out the singularity of their purpose: to hear the Word of God, and the people “listened attentively” (Neh. 8:3)—they hung on every word. Many believers today have forgotten how dependent we are on God’s Word “so that [we] may live” (Deut. 4:1), “prosper” (4:40), “succeed in everything” (29:9), “obey” (Ps. 119:34), “walk freely” (119:45), “find comfort” (119:52), and “gain understanding” (119:104).

How people today treat the reading and teaching of God’s Word speaks volumes about their spiritual condition. A sign of true spiritual maturity is the desire to receive instruction and correction from Scripture. Again, recall that verse 3 says, “The people listened attentively.” This is especially impressive since Ezra read from the book of the Law (most likely Genesis through Deuteronomy) for six hours. No one

THEOLOGY Connection

THE SCRIPTURES:
The Holy Bible reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation.

Voices from CHURCH HISTORY

“God gave [Ezra] ability and authority, and then the people gave him opportunity and invitation. Knowledge is spiritual alms, which those that are able should give to every one that needs, to every one that asks.”⁵
—Matthew Henry (1662–1714)

complained, and no one told him to hurry up. They honored the Lord by paying close attention to His Word. They attended to the Scriptures for the sake of their souls.

What is your reaction when you’re convicted by God’s Word?

Ezra Read the Law

One of my favorite critiques I have ever received of our worship gatherings was when someone complained that “we pray and read too much Scripture when we gather.” To me, that wasn’t a critique but a compliment. The pattern in this passage is formative for how the church has historically shaped its gatherings.

Have you ever noticed that the architecture of most Protestant churches throughout history prominently features a high pulpit in the gathering space? Many suspended pulpits had a staircase, and the visual of the preacher walking to a special place to exposit the Word communicated a high regard for the Bible.² In our text, Ezra stood on a pulpit built for this purpose so that all the people could see and hear. This was planned, and it was significant. Now that the wall was rebuilt, the people needed to be built up through the Word. Spiritual renewal does not happen apart from God’s Word. And God’s people were so thirsty for the Scriptures that they gathered to hear Ezra read the Law for hours.

Another key aspect of this reading of the Word was that it did not take place in the temple itself. Before the exile, the temple and sacrifices performed there were central to their faith. According to Marvin Breneman:

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.³

It is interesting to note that the audience for the reading of the Word was all the people: “men, women, and all who could listen with understanding” (Neh. 8:2). In our modern worship services today, we consider expositing the Word to be for “grownups” and encourage children to participate in programs crafted for them. Sometimes we argue that squirming children are too much of a distraction. Kids programs are great for instructing children in spiritual disciplines, but as believers, we should ensure that we are teaching our children God’s Word regularly, at church and in our homes.

In front of this multi-generational congregation, Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and with their hands uplifted, all the people said, “Amen, Amen!” Then they knelt low and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground (v. 6). The people stood out of reverence for the Word. They lifted their hands to show their dependence on God. They bowed with faces to the ground to show humility.⁴ Such a deep reverence for the God of the Word led to revival. When we need to return to God, we need God’s Word. God’s Word will lead us to worship Him.

How might you respond to God’s Word with your entire self—physically and emotionally—like the Israelites?

As we understand Scripture, we will be led to repentance and celebration (Nehemiah 8:7-12).

⁷ Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, and Pelaiah, who were Levites, explained the law to the people as they stood in their places. ⁸ They read out of the book of the law of God, translating and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was read. ⁹ Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to all of them, “This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep.” For all the people were weeping as they heard the words of the law. ¹⁰ Then he said to them, “Go and eat what is rich, drink what is sweet, and send portions to those who have nothing prepared, since today is holy to our LORD. Do not grieve, because the joy of the LORD is your strength.” ¹¹ And the Levites quieted all the people, saying, “Be still, since today is holy. Don’t grieve.” ¹² Then all the people began to eat and drink, send portions, and have a great celebration, because they had understood the words that were explained to them.

The People Repented

In the previous section, we saw that Ezra read the Word from the platform with thirteen men to stand on either side of him (v. 4). We are not told what those men were doing functionally. However, in verse 7, we see another thirteen men and are told exactly what they were doing. They were there to assist the crowds and to explain what was being read (vv. 7-8).

It is important to remember that at that point in history, the Scriptures were confined to a few scrolls.

Gathering people together for reading the Scriptures and interpretation was essential and necessary (as it is today too, though for different reasons). While Ezra read the Word, these thirteen Levites went through the crowd and explained what was being read.

In Jesus's time, the Jews formed local synagogues where communities could gather to listen to the Scriptures, receive instruction, and discuss what it meant. It wasn't until the Gutenberg printing press that the Scriptures were widely distributed. Until then, people had to gather with others to hear the Word. It is a blessing that believers today have at least one or more copies of the Bible in our homes. But we must not neglect to gather with other saints to hear and discuss the Bible. According to God Himself, this is central to our spiritual formation (2 Tim. 4:2; Heb. 10:19-31).

The Scriptures that comprised the Law were written in Hebrew, but most of the people primarily spoke Aramaic, not to mention that they had lived in a pagan land for seventy years or were born in exile. Therefore, the people needed help to hear and understand what was spoken because of their language and cultural barriers. Six hours of reading also would be a lot to take, so there may have been regular pauses for explanation and discussion.

The Bible isn't a storybook that we read once and never touch again. Paul said, "Let the word of Christ dwell richly among you, in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another" (Col. 3:16). As believers, it must be part of our spiritual diet to take in the Word slowly, chew on it, meditate, understand, and apply it, all while letting it dwell in us. We must carefully study the Scriptures to understand who God is, what He has done for us, and what He requires of us.

PHRASE **Study**

THE BOOK OF THE LAW: The first five books of our modern Bibles: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, also referred to as the Torah (Hebrew for "law") or the Pentateuch (Greek for "five-volumed"). These five books contain the history of God's people and work from creation through Israel's wilderness wandering; it also includes the laws of God for the Mosaic covenant. While technically anonymous, many scholars—including Jesus (Mark 7:10; 12:26; Luke 24:27)—agree that Moses authored them.

The men whom Ezra had stationed near the podium—the Levites—obediently helped the people understand the Word, “translating and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was read” (Neh. 8:8). Indeed, a proper understanding was necessary if the message was going to bring about spiritual transformation.

Upon hearing and understanding the book of the Law, the people recognized their sinfulness before God. A sensitivity to sin and a corresponding desire for righteousness is the mark of revival. When the Law was read, God was speaking to the people. The emotional response of the gatherers was expressed in weeping and mourning. This reaction was not emotionalism created by soft music, lowering the lights, or other external factors. It was a result of both the power of God’s Word to expose sin and the tenderheartedness of the people. Have we become callous toward Scripture today, allowing everything else to keep it from penetrating our hearts?

Conviction of sin is a sign of God’s mercy. But conviction of sin is not the end. God convicts us to bring us to repentance. Repentance involves turning away from sin and turning toward the Lord. God graciously accepts you as you are but doesn’t leave you as you were. The joy of a renewed relationship with God was the teaching’s ultimate purpose in Nehemiah 8. The nation was being cleansed by the washing of the water of the Word (cf. Eph. 5:26).

What does your attitude toward your own sin reveal about your understanding of who God is?

The People Celebrated

Though the people responded with grief over their sin, Ezra did not want them to focus only on their grief. This was not a time for weeping but for joy and giving thanks for God's faithfulness even though they and their ancestors had been faithless to God's covenant with them. Their sorrow turned to joy in light of God's promises and actions as witnessed in the Scriptures they heard. Ezra told the people not to grieve "because the joy of the LORD is your strength" (Neh. 8:10). According to James Hamilton, "the joy of the LORD":

... 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.⁶

With this declaration for joy, "all the people began to eat and drink, send portions, and have a great celebration, because they had understood the words that were explained to them" (v. 12). This was a feast of worship associated with God's rich gifts and the privilege of sharing in them. This text screams that God is faithful and God is good.

To be clear, the physical evidence of Israel's past kingdom was still gone. The people were in their homeland, but they were still servants of a pagan king. Still, they had God's Word to tell them who they were. The promises of God remained steadfast for His people. And how much more blessed are we? We stand at a much different time in history, knowing personally by

GOSPEL Connection

The reading of Scripture is important, individually and corporately. Through the study of Scripture, we discover together who God is—His holiness, goodness, grace, and mercy. Scripture points to Christ and His wondrous works of salvation. Hearing and studying it together leads to the growth of God’s kingdom.

faith the Word-made-flesh, the Word through whom all things were made—Jesus Christ (John 1)! It is He, the Lord Jesus, whom the written Word reveals from beginning to end.

When Christ first came to “tabernacle” among His people (see John 1:14), He became the chief cornerstone (Eph. 2:20), whose life, death, and resurrection enacted the process of transforming all of the earth into an eternal city, the future New Jerusalem (Rom. 8:19-23; Rev. 21:1-2). In fact, the church’s people are the living stones by which God’s temple is constructed (1 Pet. 2:5).

Until Christ returns, we, the church, are an embassy in the fallen world of the eternal city that is to come. One day, if you notice the language used at the end of the book of Revelation, God will set up His throne and temple—Jesus—in the holy city (Rev. 21:2). In a way, Nehemiah’s work was one step in the whole plan of God to establish for Himself a new earth. Paradise, which was lost in the garden of Eden when sin entered the world through humanity, will be regained. God will dwell with His people forever. This is why the city’s establishment is so essential for the safety and security of the people.

The Levites instructed the people to celebrate, knowing that God had helped them understand their sin and need for salvation. God wants us to do that too. And as we proclaim the gospel to the lost around us, we can encourage them to repent and believe so there may be times of refreshing from the Lord for them as well (Acts 3:19-20).

What do the Levites’ commands teach you about God’s heart for His people?



HEAD

Why is it necessary to know God's Word to truly obey and worship Him?



HEART

How has Nehemiah 8 convicted your heart regarding your attitude toward God's Word?



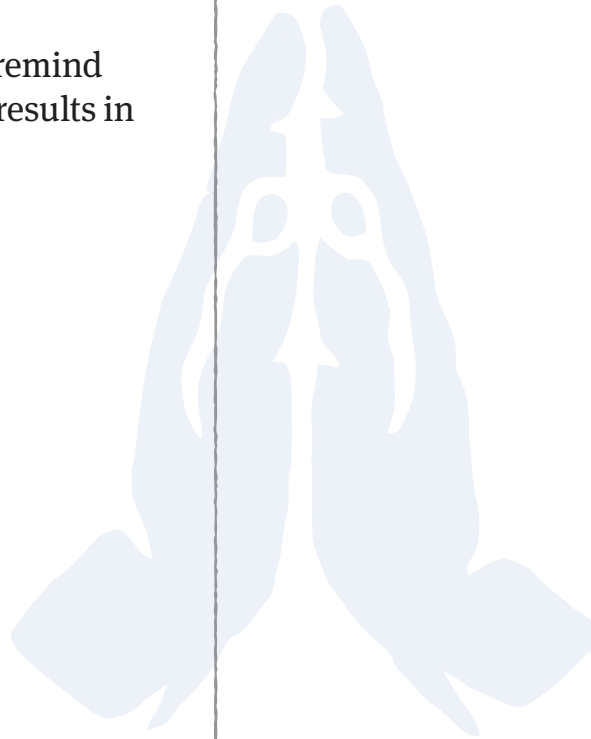
HANDS

What is one thing you can do this week to remind yourself of God's commands in a way that results in worship and celebration?

Notes

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5. Henry, 635.
6. Hamilton, 158.



THE PEOPLE WORSHIPED

CORE PASSAGE: NEHEMIAH 9:1-3; 12:27-30

Context: After hearing the book of the Law read and then praising, repenting, and celebrating, the people observed the Festival of Shelters (Neh. 8). The law stipulated that the people observe the Festival of Shelters from the 15th to the 21st day of the month, and it told them to observe a solemn day of assembly and rest on the 22nd day of the month (Neh. 8:18; cf. Lev. 23:24-34). As chapter 9 opens, the observance of this festival has just ended. The Israelites then continued their covenant renewal with God.

Key Concept: Reconciliation with God will include confession, worship, and purification.

DAILY READINGS

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 1: Nehemiah 9:1-37 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 4: Nehemiah 12:27-47 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 2: Nehemiah 9:38–10:39 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 5: Nehemiah 13:1-31 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 3: Nehemiah 11:1–12:26 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 6: Psalm 40 |

Confession and valuing God's Word are part of reconciliation with God (Nehemiah 9:1-3).

¹ On the twenty-fourth day of this month the Israelites assembled; they were fasting, wearing sackcloth, and had put dust on their heads. ² Those of Israelite descent separated themselves from all foreigners, and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their ancestors. ³ While they stood in their places, they read from the book of the law of the LORD their God for a fourth of the day and spent another fourth of the day in confession and worship of the LORD their God.

The People Mourned Corporately

Parents learn early that children often don't appreciate the attention and work it takes to keep a house in order. Children likely don't even think about what it takes to keep a house in order: someone has to clear the dust and dirt that accumulates, wash and fold the laundry, clean the dishes, mow the grass, pay the bills, etc. Kids learn these things with experience, and with experience, they begin to appreciate all their parents have done for them.

By the end of the book of Genesis, Israel was an infant nation. In Exodus, they became toddlers, young children in the time of the judges, and teens in the time of the kings. In Nehemiah, Israel had matured, and they knew they needed to take responsibility. It was time to get the house in order. What needed addressing? Well, their sins had accumulated over time.

In Nehemiah 8 and the following chapters, Israel was in the process of covenant renewal. In chapter 8, Israel had renewed the centrality of God's Word in their community life and mourned their sin of neglecting



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Notes

the law. But in verse 11, they were told not to grieve but to remember God's faithfulness. This celebration of God's faithfulness took the form of the Festival of Shelters in verses 12-17. Then in verse 18, they ended the week-long Festival of Shelters with a solemn assembly, a day of repentance before the Lord. Now in chapter 9, they would finish what they had started when the book of the Law was read and they began to weep and mourn in response to their failures. As you can see, Israel was now mature enough to see they needed to get their house in order. Israel was mature enough to look back and appreciate their Father's care in their younger years. In Nehemiah 9, Israel had finally grown up.

As chapter 9 began, Israel repented of their sin: "On the twenty-fourth day of this month the Israelites assembled; they were fasting, wearing sackcloth, and had put dust on their heads" (9:1). Take note of the physical form of their repentance. These practices are foreign to the modern reader, but they were each outward actions that communicated an inward reality of mourning and repentance.¹ They were a physical way to demonstrate their humble confession and desperate dependence on God's mercy.

First, they were fasting, refraining from food so as to focus on the Lord in prayer. They were also wearing sackcloth. Sackcloth was a thick and course fabric, usually made of goat hair. Wearing sackcloth would be like wearing itchy burlap. Sackcloth was a physical reminder that they should not be comfortable in their sin. They also put dust on their heads. The dirt on their heads added to this mourning of sin, representing their uncleanness. Later in the passage, we read of the most difficult thing for the people of Israel

to admit, namely, that they, God's chosen people, had become just like their former enemies, the Egyptians, in their arrogance, stubbornness, and spiritual blindness (9:16-17).

How can you incorporate modern expressions of humility into your spiritual life?

The People Humbled Themselves

One of the questions you might ask is how we could know the Israelites' repentance was real? At times, people do put on a facade of repentance, but it's really an act of self-righteousness—an attempt to show others how spiritual they are. People can show a semblance of remorse for their sin simply because of the negative consequences of their actions. It's one thing to put on a show of repentance to save face, but it's quite another thing to be broken over your sin.

True confession and repentance starts in the heart. God will receive anyone with grace and mercy who truly repents. We often discover just how great God is when we admit the worst things about ourselves. Perhaps the Israelites had 2 Chronicles 7:13-14 in mind in their confession: "If . . . my people, who bear my name, humble themselves, pray and seek my face, and turn from their evil ways, then I will hear from heaven, forgive their sin, and heal their land." This was the confidence they had in their honest and authentic confession, because after they repented:

Those of Israelite descent separated themselves from all foreigners, and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their ancestors. (Neh. 9:2)

GOSPEL Connection

Before Christ, reconciliation with God was similar but temporary, yet it did include confession, worship, and purification. Now, when we repent and trust in Christ, we are purified by His blood and eternally reconciled with the Father, resulting in our worship of Him.

Biblical CONCEPT

IMAGO DEI: Latin for “image of God,” this is the concept that God created all human beings, not just believers, in His image (Gen. 1:26-30). Therefore, every image-bearer possesses equal dignity and worth in the eyes of God (Gen. 9:6; Acts 10:34-35; Rom. 5:6-8; Col. 3:9-11). A lack of grace and compassion toward any people(s) for any reason is sin. We can’t honor God and dishonor those who bear His image (Jas. 3:9-10).

We often think of repentance as something done by an individual. In Nehemiah 9:2, the whole nation repented together. They acknowledged the sins of their fathers and the ways they personally failed to obey the Lord. The entire community took responsibility for individual and communal sins, turning to God for forgiveness and guidance moving forward.

While the people identified with the sins of their forefathers, they also desired to be set apart, or holy, and not disobey like their ancestors did (cf. Judg. 3:1-6). This was one of the reasons they removed the non-Israelites from their midst (Neh. 9:2). They separated themselves from non-Israelites not in an attempt to elevate themselves above others by race but because they were dealing with the sins of the Israelite nation as a whole. They were saying to those who were not descendants of Israel: “These are our sins. We need to deal with our own mess. As God’s called and covenant people, we desire to pursue allegiance to Him as the Law of Moses demands.” Israel held no one responsible for their sin and exile except themselves. They declared exactly what they were sorry for without any sense of entitlement or presumption.

Our culture has become so immersed in a victim mentality that we sometimes don’t even know how to face our own sin with honesty. Many believers walk around carrying a license to blame others, their situation, or a dozen other things for the sin that ensnares them.

We need the grace-empowered confidence of Israel here to really believe that “if we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). This is the beauty and wonder of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We confess our sins in the knowledge that we don't have to pay for them. God placed our sin on Jesus Christ on the cross, and then Jesus Christ bore the wrath of God for our sin in our place. At the same time, God showed His love for us in sending His Son in the place of sinners. Because of this, we can be honest with God, honest with ourselves, and honest with others as we repent and confess our sins.

Along with their confession and worship, the Israelites also were focused on the Word of God: "They read from the book of the law of the LORD their God for a fourth of the day and spent another fourth of the day in confession and worship of the LORD their God" (Neh. 9:3). Can you imagine reading from the Bible for a fourth of the day? We don't know exactly how they were dividing up the day, but surely it was a large amount of time. Their dedication to the reading and studying of God's Word was part of their renewal and reconciliation with God.

There is a direct correlation between your prayerful and reflective time in Scripture and your propensity toward true confession and repentance. The Word reveals the gaps and absences in our lives in comparison to what God has commanded. After the exile, God's people knew they needed to confess their sins. Confession then led to the need for God's Word and worship.

When have confession and repentance led to renewal in your life or the life of your community?

Worship and purification are also part of reconciliation with God (Nehemiah 12:27-30).

²⁷ At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, they sent for the Levites wherever they lived and brought them to Jerusalem to celebrate the joyous dedication with thanksgiving and singing accompanied by cymbals, harps, and lyres. ²⁸ The singers gathered from the region around Jerusalem, from the settlements of the Netophathites, ²⁹ from Beth-gilgal, and from the fields of Geba and Azmaveth, for they had built settlements for themselves around Jerusalem. ³⁰ After the priests and Levites had purified themselves, they purified the people, the city gates, and the wall.

Confession Led to Revival

After the Israelites' time of confession, reading of the Word, and worship in chapter 9, chapter 10 continues with the Israelites renewing their covenant with the Lord, promising to obey His commandments and appointing new leaders. Chapter 11 then shows how they resettled the city.

The construction of the wall was complete, but the city itself wasn't. So the next step was to repopulate the city. But who would live there with it still being in ruins, other than the wall? Nehemiah 11–12 mentions the names of those who returned voluntarily by lot (11:1-2). Honestly, it would have been much easier just to remain settled in the comfort of the surrounding villages, especially knowing the danger of those who were threatened by the rebuilding of the wall in the first place. So these Israelites returned, knowing they would be part of the manpower necessary to remove the debris and do the work of rebuilding the city.



After a long list of those who had returned to resettle Jerusalem, it was now time to celebrate the completion of the wall, the renewed covenant of the people, and the resettling of the city. A formal celebration and dedication of the wall needed to happen to give credit where credit was due—to God.

So in our focal passage in Nehemiah 12, at the dedication of the wall, the Israelites sent for the Levites “wherever they lived and brought them to Jerusalem” (v. 27). The Levites were scattered around and all needed to be there to be part of the celebration. They needed to be there not only to join in the celebration but also to help with purification rites where needed. With the city resettled and people coming from surrounding areas, the service of all the Levites would be necessary.

This celebration was described as “joyous” as there was much to be thankful for. The people had been rescued once again by their God, and they understood the magnitude of the occasion. This dedication would include thanksgiving and singing with “cymbals, harps, and lyres.” In addition to the instruments, voices were gathered from the surrounding regions. One commentator states:

These villages were not all in the same area. Netopha was southeast of Bethlehem; Gilgal was near Jericho; Geba and Azmaveth were northeast of Jerusalem in the Benjamite area.²

Highlighting the settlements seems to denote that the Israelites wanted the best of the best. This was going to be a celebration like no other. Singers were gathered to make sure it was a celebration to remember.

THEOLOGY Connection

WORSHIP: While many reduce worship to an event or singing of worship songs, worship first and foremost emanates from the heart and extends to all areas of life. The focus of worship is God, giving Him the praise and adoration that He deserves. Worship should be carried out not only inwardly but also in joining with other Christians to worship and steward our gifts for God’s glory. Corporate worship serves to edify and strengthen Christians, but it also serves as a witness of God’s greatness to non-believers.

Then the priests and Levites purified themselves. They had to be purified first before they could purify anything else. After doing so, they were able to purify the people. And after purifying the people, they purified the city gates and then the wall (v. 30). Hamilton states:

We don't know exactly what these rites of purification looked like. They probably involved sacrifice for cleansing and some sort of ceremonial washing. Notice how they purified the people as well as the gates and wall: they purified themselves and their city. They set themselves apart to be pure for the worship of God.³

Purification was needed because they were dedicating the wall to the Lord. They were thanking Him and celebrating Him for His goodness and faithfulness. And even though this seems like “just a wall,” for the Israelites, there was no separation between sacred and secular. The wall was not the temple, but God was at work in all of it. Because of God's faithfulness, the restoration of the wall, after the temple, was a testament to His provision and protection.

How can we as individuals and as a church develop a greater attitude of celebration to the Lord?

Revival Led to Faithfulness

In the verses following our focal passage, verses 31-36, Nehemiah described the procession of leaders and officials celebrating and thanking the Lord. Throughout chapters 11 and 12, Nehemiah was sure to name specific people who resettled in the city and those

who were used in the dedication celebration. As you read through the names in Nehemiah, you read names like Perez, a descendant of Judah; Joel, the name of a descendant of Benjamin; Zadok and Hilkiah, both priests; Mattaniah and Joiakim, both Levites; Talmon, a gatekeeper; Zorah and Ramah, both farmers; Judah and Hanani, with their musical instruments. These were the willing and faithful unknowns. These people were not looking for a place to shine; they were simply willing to serve. We can praise God for those in these generations who faithfully served without any concern for recognition and that God's covenant faithfulness is discernable from generation to generation.

A popular quote credited to a Moravian missionary, Nikolaus von Zinzendorf from the 1700s, is "Preach the gospel, die, and be forgotten." As Ronnie Martin admits about this quote:

In many ways, it echoes words of John the Baptist: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). . . . So why do Zinzendorf's words rub me the wrong way? I think it's because I don't want to end my time on earth as someone who essentially never existed.⁴

After all, Psalm 112:6 tells us "The righteous one will be remembered forever."

The names of this list are remembered because they were obedient to the call of God. God remembers the joyful obedience of His people, and each person has his or her own place in God's plan. When I look at the people mentioned, I think of them as the faithful unknowns who lived according to the promises of God, promises that led to and find their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ. The names in Nehemiah 11–12 are

Voices from CHURCH HISTORY

“Soul-purification is of faith, it is not of baptism: it is not by any outward rite even of God’s own ordaining, nor by the will of man, nor by blood, nor by birth, but by the work of the Holy Spirit through the agency of faith and that alone.”⁶

—Charles Spurgeon
(1834–1892)

difficult to pronounce, but these were real people—the faithful unknowns. God often works through the faithfulness of the unknowns.

At the dedication of the wall, the people joyfully worshiped. The priests purified all who were preparing for a renewed relationship with God. It seems like revival had come!

Kevin DeYoung once described the five ingredients of a true revival as:

1. A rediscovery of God’s Word.
2. A restored sense of the fear of God.
3. A return to our holy God through confession and repentance.
4. A renewal of commitment and accountability.
5. A reformation—things changing from that point on.⁵

If this description holds, then the Israelites experienced a true revival. They rediscovered God’s Word. They feared the Lord. They returned to Him. They renewed their commitment. And things were changing. But how long would that endure? The sin cycle would surely continue, and the need for more purification rites would continue. Oh, for the need of a Savior who would come and purify His people completely! Little did they know that their Savior would come one day. And He would come as a human descendant from these very people and as God’s only Son, Jesus.

How are you tempted to ground your purity before God apart from faith in Christ?



HEAD

Why are we called to confess both to God and to trusted fellow believers?



HEART

What has been your attitude toward confession and repentance? How do you respond when others confess their sins to you?



HANDS

What steps will you take to connect with a mature believer for mutual prayer, confession, and accountability?

Notes

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THE DAY FORETOLD

CORE PASSAGE: MALACHI 3:1-6; 4:1-6

Context: The prophet Malachi ministered to the returned people of Israel around the same time as Ezra and Nehemiah (somewhere between 460 and 425 BC). Malachi's main message, made up of six disputations (arguments) from God, was directed at the spiritual apathy of the people. He warned that although God would destroy their enemies, He would also purify His people. Though the Jews weren't guilty of blatant idolatry like their ancestors, their faith had become joyless and mechanical. Through Malachi, the Lord called them to return truly to Him.

Key Concept: A day is coming when God will purify His people and destroy evil.

DAILY READINGS

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 1: Malachi 1:1-5 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 4: Malachi 2:17-3:12 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 2: Malachi 1:6-2:9 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 5: Malachi 3:13-4:6 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 3: Malachi 2:10-16 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 6: Psalm 66 |

**A day is coming when God will purify
His people** (Malachi 3:1-6).

¹ “See, I am going to send my messenger, and he will clear the way before me. Then the LORD you seek will suddenly come to his temple, the Messenger of the covenant you delight in—see, he is coming,” says the LORD of Armies. ² But who can endure the day of his coming? And who will be able to stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire and like launderer’s bleach. ³ He will be like a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver. Then they will present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. ⁴ And the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will please the LORD as in days of old and years gone by. ⁵ “I will come to you in judgment, and I will be ready to witness against sorcerers and adulterers; against those who swear falsely; against those who oppress the hired worker, the widow, and the fatherless; and against those who deny justice to the resident alien. They do not fear me,” says the LORD of Armies. ⁶ “Because I, the LORD, have not changed, you descendants of Jacob have not been destroyed.”

Malachi Exposed the Rot

If you have ever watched a building being demolished, you know there are two primary ways to destroy it: (1) You can demolish a building from the outside with wrecking balls, and (2) you can demolish the building from the inside by strategically placed explosives that weaken the integrity of the structure. This second type of demolition is not immediately obvious to onlookers, but as the structure weakens, the building will eventually collapse. The implosion of a building can serve



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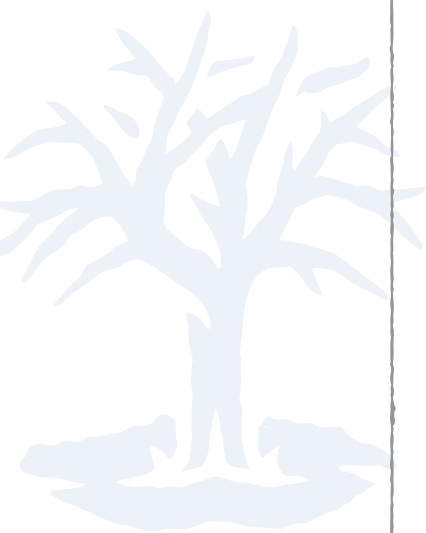
as a metaphor for the moral destruction of people as well. The visible collapse always begins with sin on the inside—a pattern of disobedience that weakens the integrity of the structure of our lives.¹

In the book of Malachi, the prophet confronted the moral deterioration of the priests among the returned exiles in Jerusalem. Assuming a later date for his ministry, at this time, the revival of Ezra and of Nehemiah upon his first return to Jerusalem was forgotten.

Moral degradation was at an all-time high, with adultery, divorce, falsehood, fraud, and sorcery running rampant throughout the city; the source of much of the corruption was the priests themselves. As already mentioned, intermarriage between Jew and Gentile, a practice prohibited in the Mosaic law, was commonplace. Additionally, traditionalism was beginning to trump the commands of Scripture, laying the foundation for both Pharisaism and Sadduceeism.²

The people began to fall apart internally before the ruin and rubble were ever seen externally. This is a warning to us that we must be diligent in destroying our sin before it violently destroys us.

One temptation we may have reading Malachi is thinking the Lord's warning—"who can endure the day of his coming"—was aimed only at the Old Testament priests (vv. 1-2). Priests were given the specific duties to prepare and offer sacrifices to God on behalf of the people, to instruct the people in the Word, and to guide their worship so that the nation of Israel could be a light to other nations. It would be easy to think this text no longer applies to Christians since Christ proclaimed through His blood a new covenant of grace.



However, in the New Testament, the apostle Peter stated that Christians are “a royal priesthood” built up as living stones into a spiritual house—a temple:

You yourselves, as living stones, a spiritual house, are being built to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. . . . you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his possession, so that you may proclaim the praises of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. (1 Pet. 2:5,9)

We are called to offer spiritual sacrifices, and in doing so we honor and revere God as most excellent, that is, above all else.

In Malachi 3:1-4, God promised to send His appointed “messenger” to clear the way for Him. The obstacles that need to be cleared in order for someone to receive the Lord are our sins. So repentance is precisely what Malachi has been calling for in this book. The messenger (v. 1a), later revealed as John the Baptist, was preparing the way for the Lord Jesus Christ, who would come to the temple and be “the Messenger of the covenant” (v. 1b). God’s judgment was coming in His perfect timing, only a few hundred years after Malachi’s pronouncement. In the Gospel accounts, Jesus came not only to cleanse the temple (John 2:13-17), He fulfilled the purpose of the temple and its sacrifices, rendering them obsolete (Heb. 10:9-10). Jesus not only fulfilled the Mosaic covenant, He also established a new covenant of grace.

The people had complained about the perceived absence of God, but Malachi said, “Who can endure the day of his coming? And who will be able to stand

Voices from THE CHURCH

“The Day of the Lord is more than just a display of God’s wrath. The ministry of the messenger is one of hope in the midst of judgment. To those who fear the Lord, that day will be a day when Yahweh refines and purifies his elect in accordance with his covenant.”⁴

—Al Fuhr and
Gary Yates

when he appears?” (Mal. 3:2). This part of the prophecy is not referring to Jesus’s first coming, in which He came to rescue us from sin and death (John 3:16-17). Rather, this passage is referring to His second coming, the terrible Day of the Lord when He will finally condemn anyone who has not trusted in the salvation He provided on the cross (3:18).

In and of ourselves, no one can stand on the day of judgment. Every mouth will be stopped (Rom. 3:19), and there will be no excuses. It is a fearful thing to consider that God is the Judge. But there is also good news—God is not only just but is the Justifier of those who have trusted in Christ (3:26). We can be justified by God’s grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. In other words, in the past, God had left sins unpunished without immediate justice. He could conceivably be accused of overlooking sin since He had not required final punishment for it. As one commentator put it:

People who sinned should have suffered spiritual death, because they did not yet have an adequate sacrifice to atone for their sins. But in his mercy God “passed over” their sins. In doing so, however, he acted against his character, which requires that he respond to sin with wrath. So the coming of Christ “satisfied” God’s justice. In giving himself as a “sacrifice of atonement,” Christ paid the price for the sins of all people—both before his time (v. 25b) and after (v. 26a).³

This proves that God is just and that He is still just in forgiving sinners because He provided the atoning sacrifice for them in Christ.

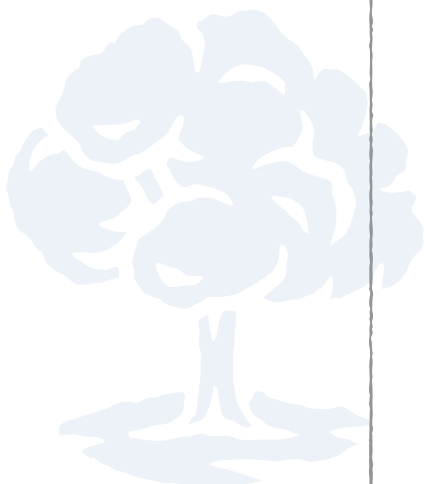
For believers, the Day of the Lord will be one of refining or cleansing with launderer's soap (Mal. 3:2). We launder clothing with bleach both to sanitize and remove any dirt, stains, or mildew. In the refining process, impurities and dross are burned away from precious metals until only what is pure and valuable remains. This is a promise and a warning. The apostle Paul used similar imagery in 1 Corinthians 3:11-13:

No one can lay any foundation other than what has been laid down. That foundation is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, or straw, each one's work will become obvious. For the day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire; the fire will test the quality of each one's work.

Works done in obedience to the Lord's commands in the power of the Spirit will survive; works done in disobedience will not. Although those who have believed in Jesus have already been justified by faith and will not face condemnation on the final day, God will still judge our works. How then does one "present offerings to the LORD in righteousness" (Mal. 3:3)? Only through the spiritual cleansing of Christ. Once you have received justification through Christ, your offerings are acceptable to God as a "living sacrifice" (Rom. 12:1).

The process of judgment and sifting began with the first coming of Christ. Those who do not obey the gospel by faith will be liable to the judgment of God.

How can you avoid falling into apathy toward God?



God Will Come in Judgment

When God said, “I will come to you in judgment” (Mal. 3:5), the image is that of a trial. He had already brought up legal arguments against the priests in the previous chapters for their apathy and hardened hearts. Now the Lord would come as a witness for the prosecution:

I will be ready to witness against sorcerers and adulterers; against those who swear falsely; against those who oppress the hired worker, the widow, and the fatherless; and against those who deny justice to the resident alien. (v. 5)

Have you ever been driving and noticed a police officer coming over the horizon? What do you do? I immediately straighten my back, move my hands to the right position on the steering wheel, and lower my speed. Why? Because mindfulness of a close authority makes you self-aware. The nearness of God is a reminder that we think, speak, and act before Him at all times. His quick testimony against those who are in willful unrepentant sin is a reminder that we should not presume upon His patience and mercy. Every warning before the final judgment is mercy.

God identified sinners whom He would judge: sorcerers (who use divination and incantations), adulterers (who break marriage vows), those who swear falsely (who lie and slander), oppressors (who take advantage of the vulnerable), and those who deprive justice for resident aliens (who show partiality against Gentiles who draw near to God). The people who do these things “‘do not fear me,’ says the LORD of Armies” (v. 5).

Those who live in unrepentant sin, as Paul said in Galatians 5:21, “will not inherit the kingdom of God.” This side of glory, we still struggle with sin, but we cannot claim to be a child of God and continue in wanton wickedness. You either stand condemned in your sin and face the justice of God or you stand accepted through faith in Christ because Jesus faced God’s justice on your behalf. Until that day, know that God is near and how you live matters (2 John 8).

It is important, therefore, to examine daily the landscape of our spiritual lives. The fear of the Lord preserves us for the Day of Judgment. In the courtroom of heaven, Jesus’s blood will be our plea. And by His power, we live with a reverential fear of the Lord, doing good works that will be tested and approved, fully pleasing to God.

Knowing that judgment is coming, how does that inspire you to share the gospel with those who don’t know Christ?

A day is coming like fire that will destroy the wicked (Malachi 4:1-6).

¹ “For look, the day is coming, burning like a furnace, when all the arrogant and everyone who commits wickedness will become stubble. The coming day will consume them,” says the LORD of Armies, “not leaving them root or branches.” ² But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings, and you will go out and playfully jump like calves from the stall. ³ You will trample the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day I am preparing,” says the LORD of Armies. ⁴ “Remember the instruction

GOSPEL Connection

Though those who trust in Jesus are in right standing with God the Father because of Christ and are being sanctified daily by the Holy Spirit, when Christ returns, He will purify us completely, finishing our sanctification process as He finally establishes His kingdom on earth.

THEOLOGY Connection

CHRIST'S RETURN:

God, in His own time and in His own way, will bring the world to its appropriate end. According to His promise, Jesus Christ will return personally and visibly in glory to the earth; the dead will be raised; and Christ will judge all men in righteousness. The unrighteous will be consigned to Hell, the place of everlasting punishment. The righteous in their resurrected and glorified bodies will receive their reward and will dwell forever in heaven with the Lord.

of Moses my servant, the statutes and ordinances I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. ⁵ Look, I am going to send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible 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. Otherwise, I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

God Will Destroy the Wicked

We do not like to talk much about the coming judgment of God. It's somewhat like the theological unicorn of the enlightened age. More personally, the judgment of God could be deemed as hate speech to the ego-centric and easily offended ears of modern audiences. But on that day, the Bible tells us that Jesus will return. When the crucified and resurrected King rides in on a horse to establish His eternal throne, that's when life really gets interesting.

It is beneficial, even necessary, that we face these realities, as uncomfortable as they may be. Thanks be to God that we have the opportunity even today to consider such things. Again, every warning before the final judgment is an opportunity for salvation.

On the Day of the Lord, there will be no escape, no last minute appeals. God has been slow to anger. Even now, the raging waters of God's wrath are furiously pounding against the dam of His patience and mercy. ⁵ One day, His patience will give way and His judgment will be both swift and total. If you reject His warning now, then you have abandoned all hope. The coming distinction between the righteous and the wicked will be unmistakable. We will see “the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him” (3:18).

The two images from 4:1 and 4:2 are consistent and distinct with respect to God's coming judgment. For the wicked, the heat consumes and destroys. For the righteous, the heat purifies and heals. This healing sun restores the God-fearers to fullness of life and peace, restoration from all kinds of tragedy and loss.

We may find the words of 4:2-3 both exciting and a little disturbing. First, God-fearers will not only be protected from judgment but will enjoy God's blessing, like well-fed, carefree, playful animals. Second, we see that the imagery of frolicking animals includes trampling the wicked who have already been burned to ashes by the justice of God. Because wickedness will finally and fully be dealt with, the righteous will experience only freedom, healing, restoration, peace, rescue, and comfort.

Why do you think God is justified in destroying all the arrogant and the wicked?

God Will Send a Messenger

Malachi ended his message with two central figures of the Old Testament: Moses and Elijah. For the Israelites, Moses represented the law (Torah) and Elijah represented the prophets. With Moses and Elijah in mind, let's examine the final exhortation of this book—two commands: remember (4:4) and look (4:5).

Remembrance is not simply intellectual recalling but an exhortation to act on what you know. To remember means to obey. All Israel had agreed to obey the law of Moses at Horeb, or Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:8). In case they had forgotten, Malachi spurred their memory by reminding them that the laws came from God Himself (Mal. 4:4), and He gave the laws for all the people.

FIGURE Study

ELIJAH: Elijah lived about four hundred years before the prophet Malachi, who lived over four hundred years before the birth of John the Baptist. Jesus affirmed John was the promised “Elijah” (Matt. 11:11-14; cf. Mal. 4:5). Yet John said he was not Elijah (John 1:19-23). Why? The people who were asking, the Pharisees, rejected John’s teaching, so for them, he would not be the Elijah who would turn their hearts to God (Matt. 17:12).

Second, God commanded them to look for the prophet Elijah. The prophet Elijah’s message for the Israelites had been to repent. In Jesus’s day, there was an expectation that Elijah would return to earth physically to herald the Messiah:

The disciples asked [Jesus], “Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?” “Elijah is coming and will restore everything,” he replied. “But I tell you: Elijah has already come, and they didn’t recognize him. On the contrary, they did whatever they pleased to him. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.” Then the disciples understood that he had spoken to them about John the Baptist. (Matt. 17:10-13)

This “Elijah,” a type and foreshadow of John the Baptist, would point people to Jesus, bringing revival and reconciliation. His ministry would be marked by turning hearts to others—“fathers to their children” and vice versa—as opposed to focusing solely on self.

What would a spiritual revival look like for you today?

After Malachi, God’s voice through His prophets remained silent for four hundred years. His Word still spoke, of course, but fresh revelations from God ceased for a lengthy period of time. Until the silence was ended with John the Baptist declaring that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29). God sent John the Baptist as the messenger to prepare His people, and God sent Jesus as the Savior to redeem His people and take God’s judgment against our sin upon Himself.

Key Concept: A day is coming when God will purify His people and destroy evil.



HEAD

Why is it important that we study the prophets, even the passages that are difficult to understand?



HEART

How has loyalty to human beings clouded your worship of God and obedience to His Word?



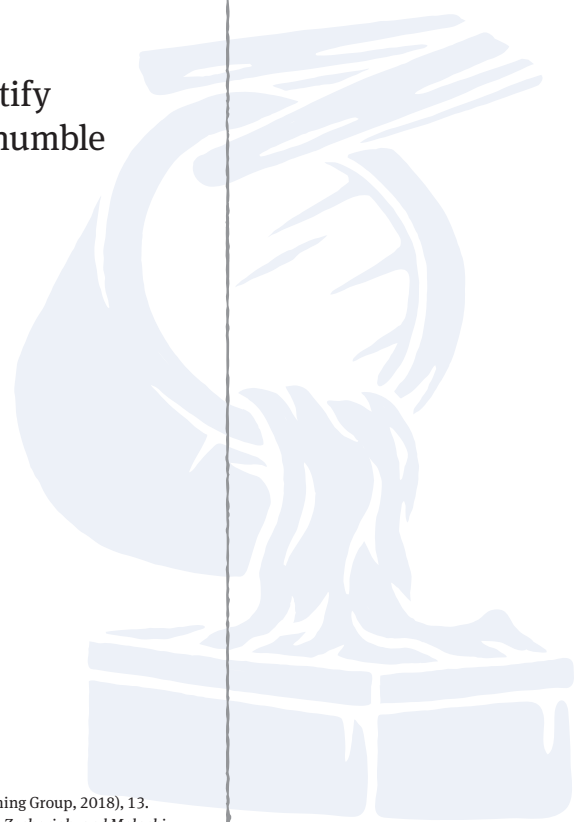
HANDS

What steps can you take this week to identify areas of sin in your life and move toward humble obedience in those areas?

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Notes



THE MESSENGER PREPARED

CORE PASSAGE: LUKE 1:5-17

Context: In the four hundred years between the closing of the Old Testament (Malachi) and the opening of the New Testament (the Gospels), many world powers and leaders shaped Jewish culture and religious life. When the book of Luke opens, Herod the Great ruled Judea and the surrounding regions. Though a descendant of Esau, Herod was appointed as king of the Jews by Rome and ruled ruthlessly. The priesthood largely became corrupt during the intertestamental period. But Zechariah was faithful to his role as priest, and along with his wife, Elizabeth, he continued to be faithful to Israel's covenant with God.

Key Concept: God will send messengers to prepare His way.

DAILY READINGS

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 3: Luke 1:26-38 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 6: Psalm 65 |

God prepared the way through the provision of a son (Luke 1:5-13).

⁵ In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest of Abijah's division named Zechariah. His wife was from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶ Both were righteous in God's sight, living without blame according to all the commands and requirements of the Lord. ⁷ But they had no children because Elizabeth could not conceive, and both of them were well along in years. ⁸ When his division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, ⁹ it happened that he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ At the hour of incense the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹ An angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified and overcome with fear. ¹³ But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, because your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John."

God Was Faithful

The Christian faith is based on eyewitness testimony and rests on real events that took place in history. And it is by the articulation and defense of this truth that faith is born and grounded. Perhaps you have heard of Edith Schaeffer, wife of apologist Francis Schaeffer and author of twenty books herself. A seeking student once asked Edith Schaeffer, "Why should I become a Christian?" She replied, "Because it's true."¹ Notice that Schaeffer didn't respond to that question by saying it's preferable or it'll solve society's problems



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Notes

or it'll benefit you psychologically. The Bible situates us into redemptive history by how we respond and live in light of this truth.

Luke, the only Gentile author of the New Testament, provided an orderly account of the life and work of Jesus Christ. Luke was a physician and a travel companion of the apostle Paul. In his travels, Luke had access to eyewitnesses and the apostles, like Peter and others. Luke carefully investigated and compiled the orderly accounts we know as the books of Luke and Acts. In particular, he compiled a narrative about the events “fulfilled” among us (Luke 1:1). “Fulfilled” here is passive, indicating that it was God who was the primary actor in bringing about the events prophesied in the Old Testament. Not only have these things been “fulfilled,” but they had been fulfilled “among us,” that is, the eyewitnesses who handed these stories down to the community of faith.

Luke addressed both books to the honorable “Theophilus,” whose name means “loved of God.” Though we cannot know for certain who Theophilus was, by the way Luke addressed him, he was clearly a man of status and financial means. Notice in verse 4 how Theophilus had already been instructed in the faith, but Luke’s purpose in writing was to provide greater certainty. It’s one thing to have certainty on the truth; the question then becomes how we respond to that truth.

The account of John the Baptist’s birth took place in the days of King Herod (37–4 BC), the puppet-ruler of Roman-occupied Judea. Whereas the Gospel of Matthew gave a glimpse of Herod’s insecurity, jealousy, and ruthlessness, Luke only mentioned Herod to give a time frame for these events. Luke was setting some historical facts in place, perhaps as future lines of

evidence if needed. But the primary focus of his narrative is on God's people and the facts about them.

So Luke introduced Zechariah, a descendant of Aaron from the division of Abijah (see 1 Chron. 24:1-19) and married to Elizabeth. Connecting Zechariah and Elizabeth to Aaron stretches God's providential hand over Israel's history, juxtaposed with Herod's fragile, manufactured kingdom. God revealed Himself as faithful to His promises made long before Herod's rule, promises of a kingdom that would last long after Herod was gone. This is our God, faithful to ordinary, unknown people. Ordinary people are deeply loved by God; He remembers us. And when it came to Zechariah and Elizabeth, God used these ordinary people in an extraordinary way.

What recent event initially seemed like a matter of luck, but now you can see God's providential hand in it?

God Was Deliberate

Luke noted a few characteristics about Zechariah and Elizabeth that are important for the development of this narrative. Both Zechariah and Elizabeth are commended for their faithfulness. Luke stated, "Both were righteous in God's sight, living without blame according to all the commands and requirements of the Lord" (Luke 1:6). Describing them as blameless did not mean they had never sinned, but Luke was associating them with other Old Testament saints who had been deemed righteous by the Lord (Gen. 6:9) despite their childless state, including Abraham and Sarah (17:1). Like Abraham and Sarah, Zechariah and Elizabeth were unable to have children and were past child-bearing years.

Voices from THE CHURCH

"Being righteous and blameless does not mean a challenge-free life, exemption from heartaches, or that every desire will be granted. If you serve God for what you can get, then you actually serve yourself. That, beloved, is the prosperity gospel, not the biblical gospel."
—Thabiti Anyabwile

In their day, childlessness was considered a disgrace:

Zechariah and Elizabeth suffered personal and social disgrace because Elizabeth could not have children. . . . Since they were well along in years, they had no hope of removing the disgraceful situation. They had to resign themselves to enduring disgrace the rest of their lives.³

Despite what people might have whispered behind their backs, Luke emphasized that Zechariah and Elizabeth's childlessness was actually part of God's plan for Israel's redemption. Luke also was emphasizing that they were "well along in years" to magnify the miracle that God was going to do (Luke 1:7).

The timing of these events also was important. At this time, about eighteen thousand priests were divided into twenty-four divisions. For two weeks a year, each division would serve in the temple in Jerusalem, but special duties were distributed by casting lots. Zechariah was chosen by lot to enter the temple and burn incense (v. 9). This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, even greater than being chosen to pray at a presidential inauguration. "It happened" could make one think it were luck, especially when casting lots were in play, but we've seen throughout the Bible that God is always at work in the casting of lots. By lot, Zechariah was chosen to present a national sacrifice on behalf of Israel. What a special and sacred moment! As one commentator said:

He had the awesome responsibility of entering the holy place, just in front of the Holy of Holies where God was present with his people.

GOSPEL Connection

God is not abrupt in His ways but has planned all along to send a Savior for His people. That includes sending messengers to prepare the way to ready hearts to receive Him.

There on the incense altar he burned the special spices. Their aroma symbolized the prayers of the people ascending to God.⁴

While Zechariah was burning the incense, the people were praying outside. We don't know what they were praying, maybe for their own personal requests. But maybe we can imagine some praying for God to speak again, for Him to renew His people, to fulfill some of the prophecies they had read and studied in the Old Testament. At that same moment, an angel appeared to Zechariah beside the altar (vv. 10-12).

Remember that after the book of Malachi, the Jews had not received any prophetic revelation from God for four hundred years. It's no wonder Zechariah was "terrified and overcome with fear" (v. 12). But the angel said for Zechariah not to be afraid "because your prayer has been heard" (v. 13). While Zechariah was bringing before God the prayers of the nation, his own prayer for a son was also on his heart, and it would be fulfilled: "Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John." Zechariah's faithful prayers had been heard, and God was taking action.

How do you view the God-given gifts in your life: as rewards or as God's faithfulness to His Word? Why does this matter?

This son would prepare the people for the coming Messiah (Luke 1:14-17).

¹⁴ "There will be joy and delight for you, and many will rejoice at his birth. ¹⁵ For he will be great in the sight of the Lord and will never drink wine or beer. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother's

THEOLOGY Connection

THE HOLY SPIRIT:

The Holy Spirit is the Third Person of the Trinity, possessing the fullness of deity like the Father and Son. His deity can be seen in the fact that He is eternal (Heb. 9:14), omnipresent (Ps. 139:7-8), the creator and giver of life (Gen. 1:2; Ps. 104:30; John 3:5-7), and directly identified with the triune God (Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14).

womb. ¹⁶ 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 fathers to their children, and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous, to make ready for the Lord a prepared people.”

The Son Would Be Spirit-Filled

The prayers of a barren couple and a desperate nation were about to be answered. Not only would Zechariah and Elizabeth rejoice, but the nation also would rejoice in their son’s birth (v. 14). The angel gave a reason for this rejoicing: because “he will be great in the sight of the Lord” (v. 15). Their promised son would be honored by God as he would be the one who prepared the way for the Messiah, Jesus.

The angel continued in his description of what this son would do. First, he would “never drink wine or beer” (v. 15). This may be similar to a Nazirite vow, similar to the one over Samson, although the passage says nothing about the cutting of hair. But what that vow would be was simply a vow of holiness, to be set apart by God. The angel also stated that he would be filled with the Holy Spirit in the womb. No other person other than Christ Himself could say they were filled with the Holy Spirit from the womb. John would be different. John, like Jeremiah and Samuel, would be set apart from the womb, and he would be filled with something more potent than wine—the Spirit of God. After centuries without any prophecy, John would be the prophet preparing the way for Christ.

How do we become like John? How can we be people who prepare the way for others to come to know Christ? The angel gives us some clues. We rid ourselves

of things that might hinder our message, and we rely on the Holy Spirit to fill us, following His lead.

The angel then stated that John would go before the Messiah in the spirit of Elijah. When most people hear of Elijah, they remember his encounter with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel or his many miracles. John the Baptist, like Elijah, would turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord. John would baptize people and point them toward the Lamb of God, Jesus, throughout his ministry. He would be like Elijah in preaching a message of repentance and a return to the one true God. John, however, never performed any miracles. Instead, he would focus on “turn[ing] the hearts of fathers to their children, and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous” (v. 17). Fathers and children would show compassion to one another, and people’s hearts would be open to accept wisdom from the righteous One. John’s mission was expressly prophesied in Malachi 4:6. Yet according to Malachi 3:1, his role also was to “make ready for the Lord a prepared people” (Luke 1:17). The name John means “God has been gracious,” and He had been, both in giving a childless couple a child and in bringing forth the messenger who would prepare the way for the Messiah.

In one way, John was special and set apart for the Lord’s service. His birth was miraculous and his ministry was Spirit-led. Yet at the same time, we have to remember that all these people were also regular people used by God. Thus, you and I also can be regular people used by God. We too can share a message of repentance and turning to the Lord. We too can have an impact on families and bringing a message of peace through Jesus. What we can learn here is not just that

FIGURE Study

JOHN THE BAPTIST: Son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary's relative, John was a relative of Jesus. As an adult, John lived in the wilderness before beginning his ministry as the forerunner, baptizing many (Luke 3:1-20). Jesus Himself was baptized by John (3:21-22), who affirmed His identity (7:18-28). John was beheaded at the order of Herod the tetrarch (Matt. 14:1-12) after saying it was unlawful for Herod to marry his brother's wife.

John the Baptist had a special role, purpose, and ministry but that we too can have a special role, purpose, and ministry as we take on the command to preach the Word and the gospel.

The narrative continues beyond our focal passage with Zechariah doubting, saying, "How can I know this? . . . For I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years" (v. 18). Zechariah, a blameless and law-abiding man, surely knew of God's work in Israel's history. He was a priest, educated in the Law of Moses and the Prophets. He knew of Abraham and Sarah giving birth to Isaac (Gen. 21:1-3) and Isaac praying for Rebekah for twenty years before she gave birth to Jacob and Esau (25:19-26). Surely Zechariah had not forgotten Samson's parents in Judges 13 or Hannah's prayers in 1 Samuel 1–2. Zechariah's name means "God has remembered," but Zechariah seemed to have forgotten God's power and faithfulness in the past.

The angel Gabriel promptly scolded the priest for not believing the good news he had just received. Since Zechariah did not take God at His word, Zechariah would be without word until his child was born. J. C. Ryle stated: "For nine long months at least, [Zechariah] was condemned to silence, and was daily reminded, that by unbelief he had offended God."⁵ Zechariah's lack of trust, despite what he knew of the ways of God, brought about rebuke.

Similar to Zechariah, Israel did not believe God's Word, which was about to be fulfilled in its proper time. Elizabeth, however, who had not received special revelation from the angel Gabriel, stated: "The Lord has done this for me. He has looked with favor in these days to take away my disgrace among the people" (Luke 1:25). Zechariah may have communicated with

her via a writing tablet what the angel had said, but we have no record of that. Instead, she responded in praise. One commentator said:

She suffered because of her husband's silence and deafness. Still, she knew God was at work in her life. She joined Sarah, the wife of Abraham, and Hannah, the mother of Samuel, in bringing God's child of promise to birth long after all hope and expectation for childbearing had vanished.⁶

How do you see the Holy Spirit's working in your life?

The Son Would Prepare the People

The other Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John also began with the correlation of John the Baptist's ministry with Jesus's ministry as the Messiah. Mark referred to Isaiah 40:3 and jumped right into "John came baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4). The Gospel of John mentioned that in the eternal Son of God was life "and that life was the light of men" (John 1:4). According to the apostle John, John the Baptist "came as a witness to testify about the light, so that all might believe through him" (v. 7). At the time of John's arrival, Israel was in a place of spiritual darkness, so the metaphor of light was fitting.

Filled with the Holy Spirit, John fulfilled his mission even in the womb. It is no coincidence that Luke dovetailed the prophecy of John's birth with Gabriel's visit to Mary in Nazareth (Luke 1:26-38). In fact, Gabriel mentioned that the Holy Spirit would create the child in Mary's womb, cross-referencing

Elizabeth's pregnancy as reassurance that "nothing will be impossible with God" (v. 37). Mary spoke in faith and then hurried to Elizabeth's house. The Holy Spirit, filling the unborn baby John, gave Elizabeth cause to celebrate: "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped inside her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit" (v. 41).

When John was born, the moment Zechariah insisted that his name would be John, he was able to speak as Gabriel had stated (v. 20). Everyone who had come to celebrate the birth with Zechariah and Elizabeth marveled at what kind of child their son would be. Bock states:

In some ways we lose the sense of drama today, because the story is so well known. To Luke's readers, the whole sequence would have raised interest, since these events take surprising turns. The sequence involving Zechariah opens up the drama of the Gospel to suggest the story is just getting interesting. Stay tuned, Luke implies, there is more explanation to come of just how special this child and the one to follow him is.⁷

Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit, prophesied: "You, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give his people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins" (vv. 76-77). Even as a newborn, the Holy Spirit made it clear that John came to prepare for the arrival of the Messiah, King Jesus.

What do you struggle to believe about God, even knowing His Word is true?



HEAD

Which of God's gifts have been the most purposeful in your life?



HEART

How can you practically acknowledge the gifts God has given you and praise Him for them this week?



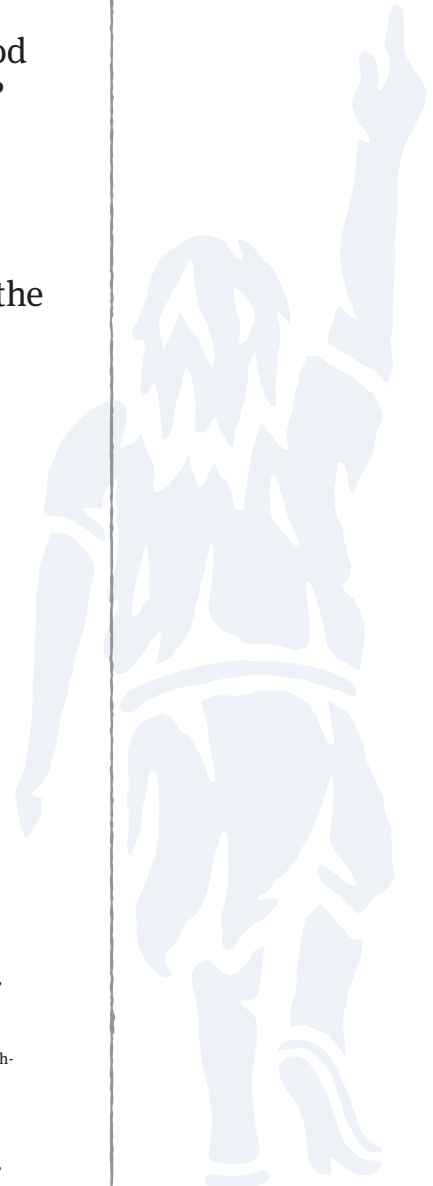
HANDS

What can you do to help prepare others to accept the message of the good news of Jesus Christ?

Notes

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PROPHETS AND PROVISION

Throughout the exile of His people, God remained faithful in providing for those who lived in faith, even under persecution. He provided His presence, protection, and prophets to show the world that He is the almighty God. And when the time was right, He allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, to continue right worship, and to rebuild the city because He is a God of restoration. The Lord desires to restore His people to a right relationship with Him. We see this ultimately through His sending His Son, Jesus Christ, to die and rise again. Through His work, people can be restored permanently and adopted into God's family. Despite our sin, which exiles, God provided a way home, and the only way is Jesus.

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