

06

AND PROPHETS PROVISION

LEADER GUIDE


the **GOSPEL**PROJECT.

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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.

Y Bonesteele

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The Gospel Project for Adults

The Gospel Project®

Adult Leader Guide
Winter 2025–26
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THE IMPACT OF PRAYER

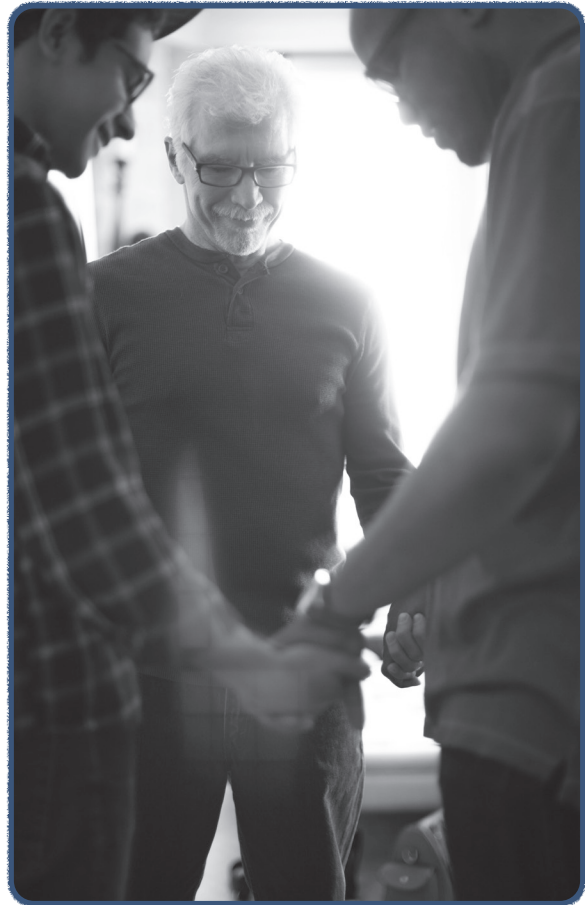
By Dwayne McCrary



God has been kind to me, allowing me to be a part of some wonderful churches and serve in multiple ways. He has allowed me to see Him do some mighty things that opened doors for me to help other leaders. God allowed me to be in a church that grew by a thousand people in attendance over a five-year period. God used a lot of resources to make that happen in that church. Staffing, city culture, and a variety of other things came together for that church to be driven with a passion to reach people with the gospel. We saw college students, convicted felons, a satanist, and many others become faithful followers of Jesus.

Several of us joined the staff at the beginning of those five years, giving the appearance that we were major contributors to that growth. Several of us began to be asked to write articles and lead conferences explaining what we were doing. As those invitations began to come, the challenge was figuring out what we were actually doing that contributed to the growth. Obviously, God used us and our talents to impact what was going on. We were faithful to training people, to looking for ways to reach out in our community, to starting new Bible study groups, and to giving outreach a priority, but those were actions others were taking and not seeing the same results.

The answer to why the growth was taking place came on an early Saturday morning when I went to the church parking lot to meet a group of men for a golf outing. To my surprise, another group of men were already in the church facilities. It was a smaller group comparably, no more than ten men. They had keys to the building, which was unusual to say the least. They met in the building every Saturday morning to pray. They prayed for what



would happen the next day, for God to remove obstacles for those who needed the Sunday School lesson and sermon, and for the people who would be leading the classes and worship. This smaller group met regardless of the weather or of the season. Not all would be present every week, but some would. Their only purpose was to pray. There was no coffee or food present. They had been faithfully doing just that for several years. The church

*As leaders of Bible study groups,
we can impact our community by the way
we lead the people in our group to pray.*

had been steady during those years, but what was happening at that point was what these men had been asking God to do from the first day they met to pray. They were finally seeing God answer the prayer they had been voicing for several years.

People were aware of this group of praying men, with most being impressed by their consistency but not impressed enough to make the commitment to join them. To be fair, they invited others to join them but did so with humility and without fanfare. They did not brag about what they were doing. Instead, they simply carried out the task of asking God to impact their city—every Saturday morning—for years. These men were marked by prayer. They were the reason we were seeing God do what He was doing at that time in the life of that church.

Imagine what might happen in your church if a few people were willing to be marked by prayer, to approach God with the hope of seeing Him reach a community or city for His glory, regardless of whom God used to do so or how He did so.

Imagine Sunday School classes ending their weekly gathering with a time of prayer that grew out of the passages studied during that hour, committing to follow God in whatever way He saw fit.

Imagine what might happen if the people who attended the Bible study groups then spent some of their prayer time during the week echoing the emphasis of the Bible passage studied, expressing their willingness to follow Jesus and His plans for them.

As leaders of Bible study groups, we can impact our community by the way we lead the people in our group to pray. Here are some specific actions we can take that might help:

- Maintain a list of the names of people our group is praying for who need to know and follow Jesus.
- Carry a list of people for whom we and the group are asking God to draw to Him through our conversations and witness.
- Make sure those names are the first item on any prayer list we distribute to our Bible study group.
- Set aside the second Sunday's group prayer time to focus specifically only on those same names, adding and updating.

What other actions could you take to encourage your group to consistently pray for people who are far from God and for the opportunity to share with them?

G. Dwayne McCrary is the manager of adult ongoing Bible studies at Lifeway. This article includes excerpts from his soon-to-be-released book *Marked by Prayer*. The book can be preordered at Lifeway.com, releasing February 17, 2026.

SCOPE AND SEQUENCE

The Gospel Project for Adults aspires to point to the gospel of Jesus Christ through weekly group Bible studies and additional resources that show how God's plan of redemption unfolds throughout all of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation. This curriculum provides theological yet practical studies that immerse your group in the STORY of the gospel, helping to develop a gospel CULTURE that leads to gospel MISSION.

GOSPEL STORY

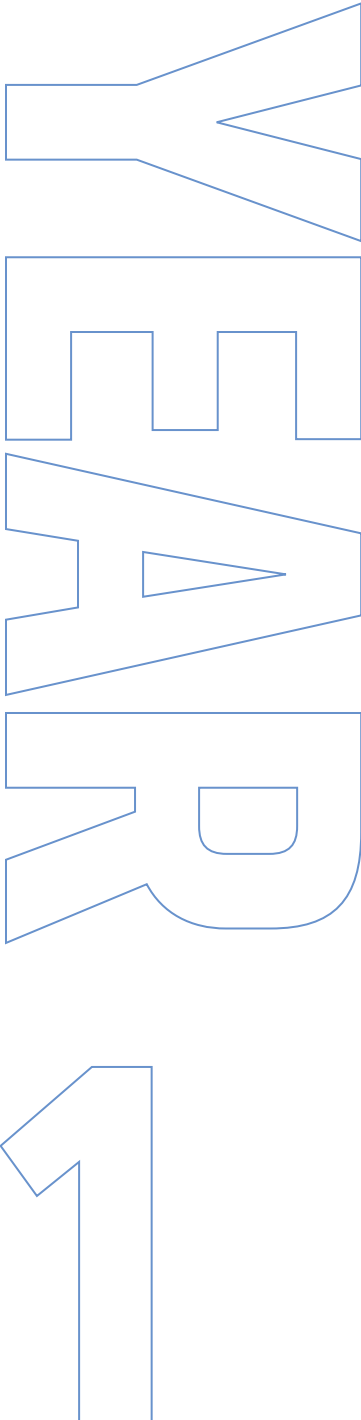
Our aim is to help people see the storyline of Scripture, the thread from the beginning to end, that weaves God's plan to rescue and redeem His creation through His Son, Jesus Christ.

GOSPEL CULTURE

Our hope is that the message of the gospel saturates our understanding of Christ, increasing our joy in Him, helping doubters become believers who become declarers of the gospel.

GOSPEL MISSION

Our desire is to empower believers to live on mission, declaring the good news of the gospel in word and deed for God's glory and the growth of His kingdom.



VOL 01:
CREATION AND COVENANT

(Genesis; Job)

Fall 2024

Unit 01: Foundations

Unit 02: God's Promises

Unit 03: Struggles of Faith

VOL 02:
LAW AND LIFE

(Exodus–Deuteronomy)

Winter 2024–25

Unit 04: God's Miraculous Work

Unit 05: God's Character

Unit 06: Humanity's Selfishness

VOL 03:
LAND AND LOSS

(Joshua–1 Samuel)

Spring 2025

Unit 07: God Is for His People

Unit 08: God Delivers His People

Unit 09: God Cares for His People

VOL 04:
FOOLISHNESS AND WISDOM

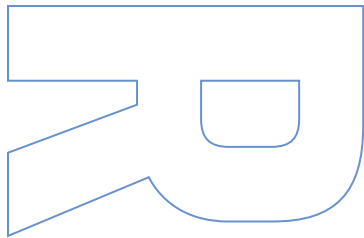
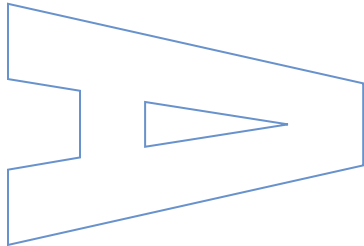
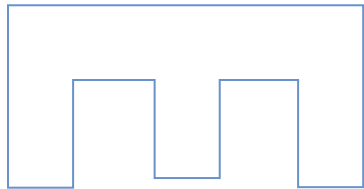
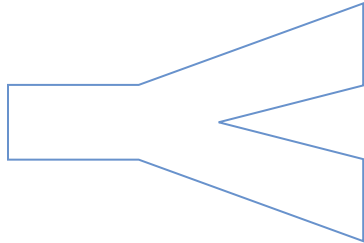
(1 Samuel–1 Kings; Wisdom Literature)

Summer 2025

Unit 10: The Foolishness of God's People

Unit 11: Everything Belongs to the Lord

Unit 12: The Need for Wisdom



VOL 05:

DIVISION AND DEFIANCE

(1 Kings–2 Chronicles; The Prophets)

Fall 2025

Unit 13: Divisions

Unit 14: Renewal

Unit 15: Decline

VOL 06:

PROPHETS AND PROVISION

(The Prophets; Ezra–Esther)

Winter 2025–26

Unit 16: God in the Exile

Unit 17: God in the Restoration

Unit 18: God in the Return

VOL 07:

THE SON HAS COME

(The Gospels)

Spring 2026

Unit 19: The Arrival

Unit 20: The Preparation

Unit 21: The Ministry

VOL 08:

THE SON HAS AUTHORITY

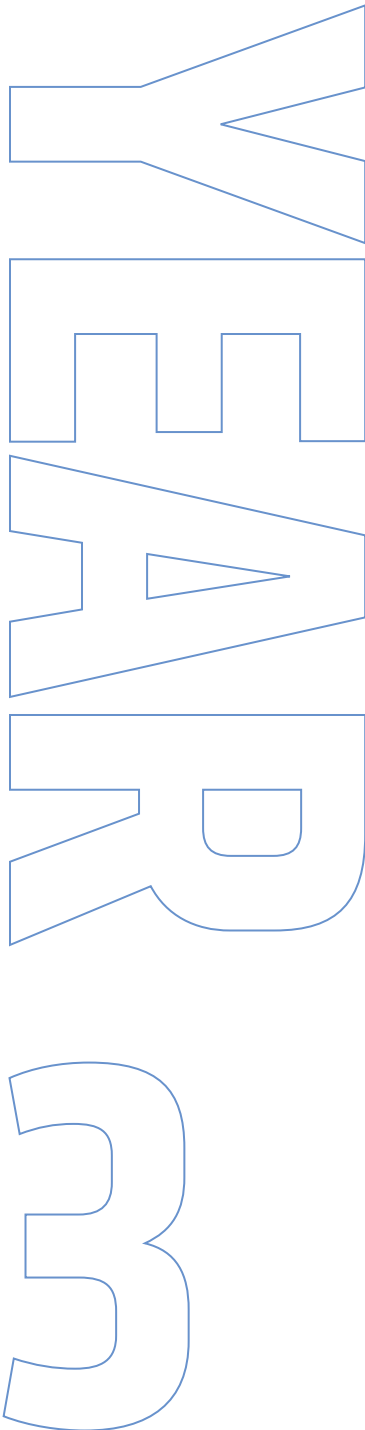
(The Gospels)

Summer 2026

Unit 22: Responses to Jesus

Unit 23: The Way of Jesus

Unit 24: The Teachings of Jesus



VOL 09:
THE SON HAS TRUTH

(The Gospels)

Fall 2026

Unit 25: The Truth of His Power

Unit 26: The Truth of His Actions

Unit 27: The Truth of His Kingdom

VOL 10:
THE SON HAS RISEN

(The Gospels; Acts)

Winter 2026–27

Unit 28: The Final Days

Unit 29: Post-Resurrection

Unit 30: The Gospel Spreads

VOL 11:
THE CHURCH HAS A MISSION

(Acts; The Epistles)

Spring 2027

Unit 31: Sharing Truths of the Mission

Unit 32: Living Out the Mission

Unit 33: Christ Focuses Our Mission

VOL 12:
THE CHURCH HAS A FUTURE

(The Epistles; Revelation)

Summer 2027

Unit 34: We Are in Christ

Unit 35: We Are Citizens of Heaven

Unit 36: Jesus

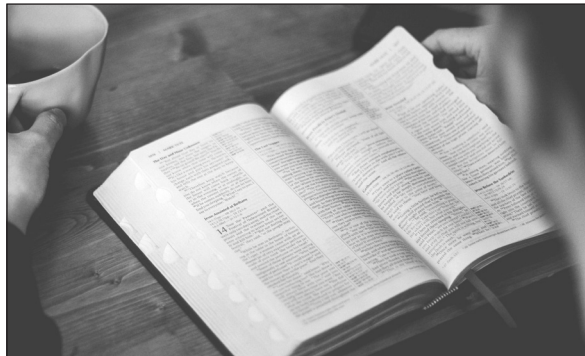
HOW TO USE THE LEADER GUIDE

The Leader Guide is an important tool in your personal and group experience with The Gospel Project for Adults. Here's how to make the most of your time with it:

1) READ THE WORD DAILY

Begin each week by reading the Scriptures according to the Daily Readings. These Bible readings will help you mentally and spiritually prepare for the group experience each week while also building healthy Bible study habits for personal growth. The daily readings will help you understand the context of the Bible story for each week's session and fill in the gaps between sessions. The weekly psalm reading will help you think worshipfully and prayerfully about the story's place in the greater redemptive narrative of the Bible. And the timeline will give you a visual perspective so you can place the Bible story in the larger context of the Bible's storyline.

- **Daily Readings**
- **Chronological Timeline**



TIMELINE

Daniel and His Friends Remain Faithful to God's Dietary Laws (Daniel 1)

SESSION STUDY:
Daniel's Friends Refuse to Worship Nebuchadnezzar's Statue (Daniel 3)

Daniel Interprets the Writing on the Wall for Belshazzar (Daniel 5)

Daniel Interprets Nebuchadnezzar's First Dream (Daniel 2)

Daniel Interprets Nebuchadnezzar's Second Dream (Daniel 4)

Daniel Is Thrown into the Lions' Den (Daniel 6)

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



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

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2) STUDY FOR PERSONAL PREPARATION

The Personal Preparation section contains the Scripture passages that will guide you and your group to prepare for Bible study during the week before group time begins. A Bible study prompt will help you engage with the Scripture passage, but encourage your group to do more than what's asked in the prompt. Space is provided for you and your group to add notes and questions and markings that will help you study the passage more deeply and see any nuances about the words and phrases of the Scripture provided. In addition to a brief commentary with thought-provoking questions to help you and your group dig deeper into the text, leader notes will provide you with additional nuggets for understanding the Scriptures. Use this Personal Preparation to experience what your group is experiencing as they study the week prior. Consider what questions, thoughts, or challenges they might have while engaging with the Scripture passages.

- Scripture
- Commentary
- Questions

Notes

PERSONAL PREPARATION

GOD IS ALWAYS ABLE TO SAVE (DANIEL 3:14-18)

Circle all the conjunctions, the connecting words, in the passage (and, but, if, then, when, etc.).

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."

King Nebuchadnezzar set up a gold statue to be the center of worship for his subjects. But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (previously called Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah) determined not to bow to it—they worshiped the Lord alone, even while facing a gruesome death. Some Chaldeans, likely jealous these Jews were set over Babylon's affairs, told the king these three men would not serve his gods nor worship his statue, which enraged the king (vv. 1-13).

Daniel's friends determined to obey God's commandments: "Do not have other gods besides me. Do not make an idol for yourself" (Ex. 20:3-4). So Nebuchadnezzar, himself jealous for the worship and total submission of his subjects, did what all people do who set themselves against the one true God—he persecuted God's faithful people, threatening them with death by fire.

LEADER NOTE: These three men faced a very real threat. Standing before the king, perhaps they saw the furnace in the distance. Their earthly lives seemed to be in Nebuchadnezzar's hands. At the same time, these three men saw the ultimate weakness and smallness of Nebuchadnezzar compared to the Lord. They believed in the almighty, sovereign power of their very real God. Like Jesus's apostles after them, they could have said, "We must obey God rather than people" (Acts 5:29). Perhaps Peter had Daniel's three friends in mind when he said those words before those who crucified Jesus.

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

32 Unit 10 | Session 2 | Courage

Notes

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

The persecution coming for these three courageous Jews was a very real threat, yet they saw this as an opportunity for them to give glory to God. Nebuchadnezzar mocked their God, claiming to have supreme power in this matter (Dan. 3:15). Still, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego remained firm in their faith. They would worship God alone, no matter the outcome. The Lord could rescue them with a miracle, but He might not. Both were acceptable outcomes because the Lord alone is the true God who is worthy of worship.

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.

These friends embodied Paul's words from Philippians 1:21: "For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." For the Christian, there is no losing situation. As Jesus said, "Don't fear those who kill the body but are not able to kill the soul; rather, fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28). The reverent fear of God is the end of all other earthly fears.

LEADER NOTE: Jesus told His disciples they would be persecuted for His name (Matt. 10:16-18). Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were forerunners for those courageous disciples, and for us. They knew they faced the king's fury not because of a failure of faith but precisely because of their faith, and they trusted God with the outcome.

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

VOICES FROM CHURCH HISTORY

"Let faith be yours, and God will be with you in your trouble."¹
—Augustine of Hippo (c. 354–430)

33

3) DIRECT THE GROUP EXPERIENCE

The Group Experience for each session includes an activity and interactive questions designed to be used in the group context to engage your group in active learning. The personal prep you and your group put into the days leading up to your group time will provide a richer discussion and more thoughtful theological applications to mutually encourage each other during your group time. The first page of the Group Experience will help you engage your group members as they arrive. Dialogue suggestions describe the context, transitions, and a recap of Bible readings or previous sessions to remind your group of what has already been studied or give a framework for where the lesson is heading. The second page gives a visual representation of the activity from the Personal Study Guide. A teaching outline helps guide your members through the activity and the debrief discussion.

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

GROUP ACTIVITY

CHART: Direct your group to page 30 in their Personal Study Guide (PSG), where they will find a chart titled "Modern-Day Statues and Furnaces." Recreate this chart on a board in your room so you can record the group's responses.

Modern-Day Statues and Furnaces

Read Daniel 3:14-18, 24-29. Identify some modern-day "statues" that demand worship and modern-day "furnaces" we may face for upholding the gospel.

MODERN DAY GOLDEN STATUES	MODERN-DAY FIERY FURNACES

READ: Call for a volunteer to read Daniel 3:14-18.

ANALYZE: Invite the group to form small groups of 3-4. Say, "Although most of us will never be asked to worship a golden statue, there are plenty of idols that we will be asked to worship or that will vie for our attention." Guide the groups to create a list in the PSG of modern-day "statues" believers are expected to go along with. After a few minutes of discussion, invite a volunteer from each group to call out their findings. Record these in the left column on the board. Suggest adults write down other groups' findings on their own chart in the PSG.

SAY: Nebuchadnezzar was furious the three men would choose not to worship the statue he had made, so he had them thrown into the fiery furnace. Jesus said His followers would face persecution by those who hated Him. (Read Matthew 10:16-20.) Though we may not face a fiery furnace, we should expect consequences for standing firm for the sake of the gospel.

Notes



- Group Activity
- Interactive Questions
- Theological Applications

4) TAKE THE NEXT STEPS

After the recap of the activity, help your group take the next steps with the day's Scripture lesson by walking them through the Head, Heart, and Hands applications. Invite volunteers to share and discuss answers to the questions for their mutual benefit. Then take prayer requests and praises as you wrap up your group time. Space is provided to jot those down in your guide for prayer during the following week. And finally, guide your group to read and pray through the designated psalm, focusing your thoughts and words once more upon God's Word as you conclude the session.

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

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

HEART: Courage is a heart posture, a reliance upon God no matter the cost. Jesus doesn't coddle us but tells us the truth—we will have suffering in this world, but He also said He has overcome the world (John 16:33). No wonder the most repeated command in the Bible is “Do not fear” because “If God is for us, who is against us?” (Rom. 8:31).

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

HANDS: Courage is faith displayed. We inevitably will run into obstacles, temptations, and hard decisions while following Jesus. Yet these are opportunities to show courage in Christ, knowing that He has saved us by grace through faith and has given us His gift of eternal life.

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

NEXT STEPS

Challenge the group to consider these actions as responses to this session.

- Read Matthew 10:16-20. Reflect on Jesus's promise that the Holy Spirit will give us the words and courage to stand firm.
- Consider how the various areas of your life need to be adjusted to ensure you are not conforming to the ways of this world but conforming to Christ.
- Share with someone in your group how you will stand firm for the gospel this week, and invite a followup conversation later in the week.

Invite volunteers to share prayer needs for this week. Encourage them to record these in the space on page 31 in their PSG so they can pray for others throughout the week.

PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES

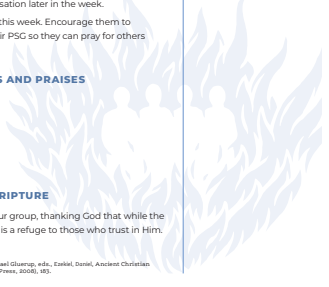
PRAYING SCRIPTURE

CLOSE: Pray through Psalm 144:6 with your group, thanking God that while the wicked world is spinning out of control, He is a refuge to those who trust in Him.

References

¹ Augustine of Hippo, quoted in Kenneth Stevenson and Michael Gleason, eds., *Exodus, Daniel, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 85.

Notes



- Application Questions
- Scripture-Based Prayer
- Prayer Requests

PROPHETS AND PROVISION

By David McLemore



When my wife and I began dating, we quickly realized we had different vibes. I was a laid-back, go-with-the-flow kind of person, while she was a planner. When I asked her out on a date, she wanted to know where we were going, when we were going, how long we would be there, and what would happen after that. My “we’ll play it by ear” answer wasn’t good enough. She needed to know what her future held.

I learned later that such knowledge calmed her. She could relax and enjoy herself if she knew what was coming next. Aren’t we all that way to some degree? While I didn’t need to know what was next, I have always longed to know if I would be okay while waiting for an uncertain future. No one likes to be in the dark.

The Bible opens with God saying, “‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Gen. 1:3). That verse isn’t only a comment on creation; it is a comment on revelation. God doesn’t keep us in the dark. God doesn’t make us go without. Through His prophets, the Lord tells His people what’s ahead, and through His provision, He cares for them while they wait.

PROPHETS

The Bible’s first great prophet, Moses, was sent to the Israelites with a message of God’s concern for their oppression and His promise to deliver them (Ex. 3:7-10). But Moses originally pleaded for God to send someone else, claiming he had a sluggish tongue (4:10). But a sluggish tongue is no problem for God. As the Lord told the apostle Paul thousands of years later, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). Since Moses was God’s prophet, he didn’t need any of his own power. He had the power of the Almighty with him, as did every Old Testament prophet.

From Moses to Elijah to Jeremiah to Malachi, God’s prophets proclaimed God’s desire to dwell with His covenant people and for them to keep covenant with God by obeying His commands. They failed to listen to the prophets, and His warnings of judgment came to pass (2 Chron. 36:16). But God’s heart was always for His people, and His prophets were His voices in the exile calling them to return to Him and be restored (Jer. 29:10; Ezek. 39:25; Dan. 9:25; Zech. 10:6; Mal. 3:7). If only they would return to Him, their weeping and sadness would only last the night; joy would come in the morning (Ps. 30:5).

Through the prophets, God’s people could know what was coming, the good and the bad. But God did more than inform—He assured His people that His provision would accompany His prophecy. They could trust His heart.

Jesus is the ultimate prophet who speaks a better word than all the rest, and He is the ultimate provision that secures our future forever.

PROVISION

When the news wasn't good and the days ahead looked grim, God's provision was racing alongside His prophecy. The hard truths were wrapped in sweet truths of mercy, grace, and forgiveness. God would not abandon His people, for He had bound Himself to them through His covenant of grace. He would remain faithful, and when they needed Him, He would be there. When they passed through the waters, He would be with them. The rivers would not overwhelm them. And when they walked through the fire, they would not be scorched, and the flame would not burn them (Isa. 43:2).

That was true for Israel as they walked on dry land through the Red Sea (Ex. 14). It was true for Daniel's three friends, whom Nebuchadnezzar threw into the fiery furnace (Dan. 3). It was true for Daniel, who was thrown to lions (Dan. 6). God provided for His people. And it was true for Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, who experienced God's provision and favor to protect their people.

Biblical prophecy works on several levels. It can be fulfilled in multiple ways and at various times. Often there is an immediate fulfillment and an ultimate fulfillment. We are not Israel hemmed in by the Red Sea and the Egyptian army, but we face sin and death daily. We are not Daniel's friends facing brazen idolatry or the fire, but we face the trials and tribulations of life as a Christian in this broken world.

What is our hope in such times? We find the answer in the prophets. The greatest provision promised from their mouths was not relief from the waters or flames of this world but from the waters and flames of death and hell. The greatest provision was not in earthly and temporal redemption but in eternal salvation in Christ: "He was pierced because of our rebellion, crushed because of our iniquities; punishment for our peace was on him, and we are healed by his wounds" (Isa. 53:5).

The greatest Prophet is also the greatest Provision: "Long ago God spoke to the ancestors by the prophets at different times and in different ways. In these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb. 1:1-2). Jesus is the ultimate prophet who speaks a better word than all the rest, and He is the ultimate provision that secures our future forever.

In Jesus we have a prophet who lets us know what's ahead and a provision to sustain us as we wait. No one likes to be in the dark. Praise God that the light has come in Christ!

David McLemore serves as an elder at Refuge Church in Franklin, Tennessee. He is a regular contributor to Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary's *For the Church* website and writes on his own website, *Things of the Sort*.

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, Hananiah, 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

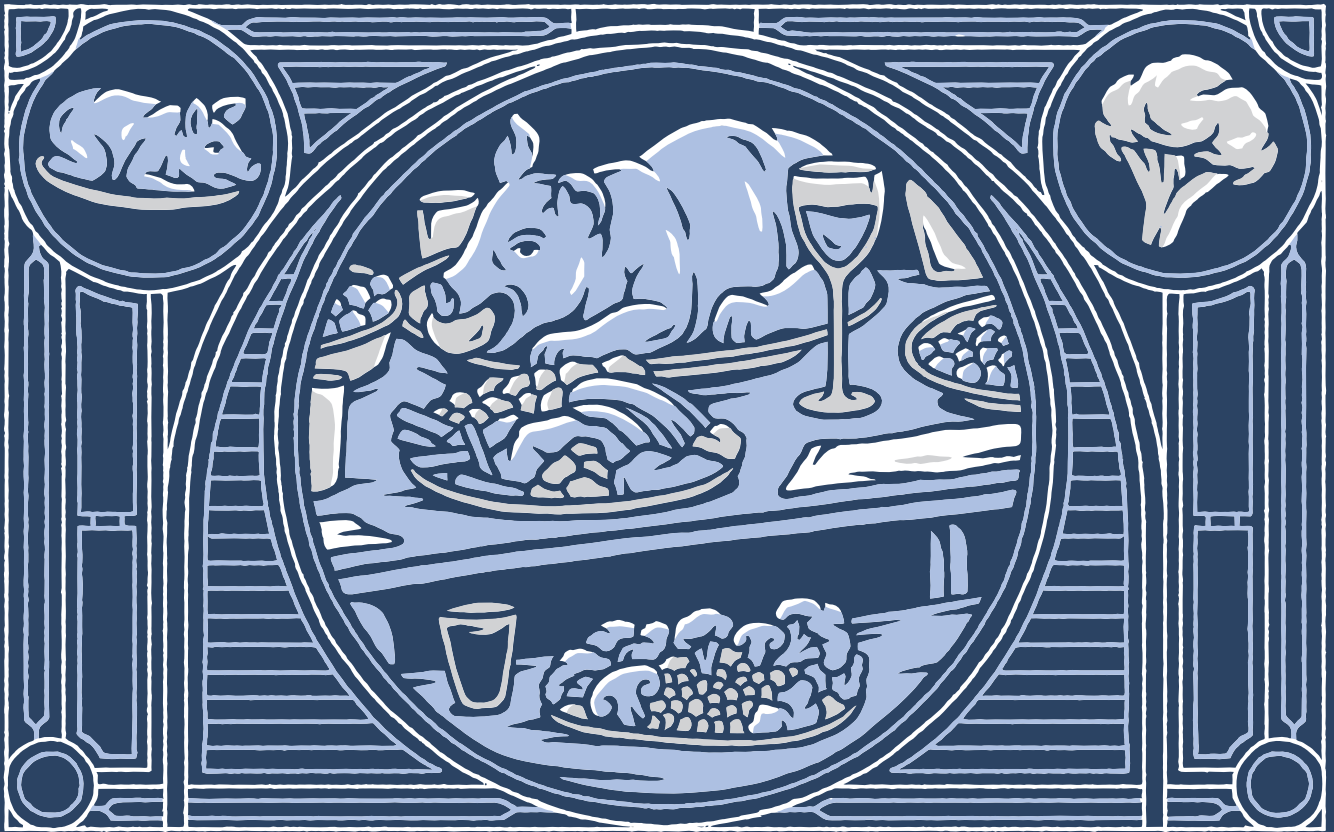
Obedience to God leads to greater wisdom from God.

As you examine Daniel 1:8-21:

- Recognize that Daniel determined to remain faithful to God and His law with its dietary restrictions.
- Consider how our obedience to the Lord helps us grow in wisdom and knowledge of the Lord.



Scan this QR code to **PROVIDE FEEDBACK** of your experience with The Gospel Project for Adults materials.



TIMELINE

Nebuchadnezzar Takes the First
Exiles to Babylon, Including Daniel
and His Three Friends (2 Kings 24)

Daniel Interprets Nebuchadnezzar's
First Dream (Daniel 2)

Daniel Interprets Nebuchadnezzar's
Second Dream (Daniel 4)

SESSION STUDY: Daniel and His Friends Remain
Faithful to God's Dietary Laws (Daniel 1)

Daniel's Friends Refuse to Worship
Nebuchadnezzar's Statue (Daniel 3)

Daily Readings

- ☐ **Day 1:** Daniel 1:1-7
- ☐ **Day 2:** Daniel 1:8-21
- ☐ **Day 3:** Daniel 2:1-13
- ☐ **Day 4:** Daniel 2:14-24
- ☐ **Day 5:** Daniel 2:25-49
- ☐ **Day 6:** Psalm 112



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

PURSUING OBEDIENCE TO GOD IS ALWAYS RIGHT DESPITE THE OBSTACLES (DANIEL 1:8-14).

Underline the steps Daniel took in order to obey the Lord.

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.

Obedying God is not always easy, but imagine being in Daniel's shoes: far from home, a captive of Babylon, and forced to assimilate to their culture and serve their king. Most people in such a situation would try their best to stay on their captor's good side, not wanting to draw any additional attention to avoid further suffering. Daniel's conscience, however, wouldn't allow such a route. He determined not to defile himself with the king's food and wine. His obedience to God meant more to him than any suffering that may come as a result.

How Daniel was being obedient in rejecting the king's food is somewhat unclear. Some scholars say the king's food was offered to idols, but might vegetables have been offered as well? The most reasonable option may be that Daniel wanted to obey God in keeping his Jewish identity and rejecting full assimilation into Babylonian ways. He couldn't control what others called him. He couldn't control what they taught him. But he could control what he put in his body, and that act of obedience would help him remain close to God. Beyond any specific dietary law, faithfulness was Daniel's goal. This was a risk, as obedience often is, but it was a risk worth taking for Daniel.

LEADER NOTE: In our day, it's hard to imagine how vegetables and water wouldn't be better for one's appearance than meat and wine, but that's because our standard of beauty differs from ancient Babylon's. Babylonians admired well-fed young men with the body and mind to prove it, hence Nebuchadnezzar's order in Daniel 1:3-5. When we want to lose weight, we eat vegetables and drink water. But Daniel wanted to eat vegetables and drink water to obey the Lord, risking not matching up to Babylon's standards. How could that possibly work? Only God could do it. That's the entire point. God's sovereignty weighs heavy on this passage.

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

Verse 9 tells us that God granted kindness and compassion to Daniel from the chief eunuch. When we follow God's call on our lives, He will prepare the way and give us wisdom for the road ahead (Jas. 1:5). It was with wisdom that Daniel intended to obey the Lord. He began by asking permission. He didn't throw a fit; he was respectful. Yet he was also clear. He had reasons beyond personal preference and the need to prove a point—he didn't want to defile himself. This was a matter of faithfulness to him, and God blessed that act of faith.

With wisdom, Daniel also offered a test to the guard: vegetables and water for ten days followed by an evaluation. This reasonable option gave the guard, and the eunuch, an opportunity to honor Daniel's request and not put himself in jeopardy. If it didn't work, the supervisors had an out. If it did work, Daniel and his friends wouldn't have to defile themselves. Through it all, God was at work, and no matter the outcome, He would get the glory through Daniel's actions.

LEADER NOTE: Daniel was a risk-taker but not reckless. His faithfulness was not an attempt at gaining God's favor in an unfavorable situation. Rather, Daniel's faithfulness was grounded in the faithfulness of God. He was not surprised at the current events, for he had heard God's word through the prophets that came before him (see Jer. 25). What God says, He is faithful to do, even in judgment. But Daniel was alive and now in a foreign land, in a position of influence, no less. So he let the grace of God work deep in his heart and teach him to lean wholly on the God who saves, no matter the circumstances. Ultimately, he knew he belonged to the God of Israel, and he would remain faithful to the Lord whatever came his way.

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

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.

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.

WHEN WE OBEY GOD, KNOWLEDGE AND WISDOM INCREASE (DANIEL 1:15-21).

Highlight the result of Daniel and his friends' faithful obedience.

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.

Daniel's "risk" paid off. After ten days, Daniel and his friends looked better than all the rest. Yet this was but the first "better than" for God's people in the king's court because their obedience gave rise to more wisdom from the Lord.

Verse 17 shows how obedience is a wise step we take on the path toward wisdom. In fact, wisdom cannot be gained any other way—it is a gift from God that grows as we cultivate it and our relationship with the God of all wisdom. A young doctor who wants to make it big in his field cannot skip the obedient study and preparation required. An athlete who wants to play at the top of his game for a long time cannot forsake the obedience required to eat the right foods, do the right exercises, and care for the body. Obedience is the path to grow toward what we ultimately want, but it is born from what God does for us.

LEADER NOTE: God will always bless obedience. Now, the blessing of God can look different than our expectations. Daniel and his friends were still in captivity. God didn't send them back home. But He did give them favor in their new land. God did use them for His glory in their hard circumstances. A life of obedience to God often may look like failure to the world, but that's because the world cannot see ultimate reality. God is the mover behind all things, and all the wheels are turning for His glory and His people's good. Not immediately, but ultimately.

How does obedience help cultivate wisdom in the Christian life?

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.

Daniel and his friends' obedience was used by God to grant them knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. In fact, no one was found to be their equal (v. 19). This is even more remarkable when we realize that what they excelled in was not the things of God but the things of Babylon. They became Babylonian literary experts, and Daniel understood visions and dreams. They surpassed all the king's advisers in providing him helpful counsel. Even in captivity, Daniel and his friends pursued the well-being of the city that it and they might thrive and be a testimony to the greatness of the one true God (Jer. 29:7). Still, Daniel and his friends would face a fiery furnace and a lions' den in the days ahead. Faithful obedience will result in increased godly wisdom but may also come with a worldly cost.

What can we learn from this? Not just that God will always grant wisdom, but that He will always be with us in whatever He sends us to do. We can trust His plan even when we can't see the path. Our call is to obey Him and let Him prove His goodness to us.

LEADER NOTE: Wisdom is not only knowing what to do in certain situations but also how to recognize the gravity of a situation. To many, Daniel's diet may have meant nothing. Hadn't he and his friends already accepted the new names and the education? Yet Daniel recognized this was the hill to die on. He knew this was the opportunity to mount a faith-based resistance. This was an opportunity for God to come through. Daniel and his friends were at God's mercy alone. They could not make their bodies look better than the others. Only God could do that. Wisdom was knowing this was the time to take a new step toward glorifying God, and God came through.

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

Notes

ARRIVAL

ENGAGE: As the group arrives, ask: “What have been some of your New Year’s resolutions from the past year? Have you followed through with any resolutions? If you didn’t follow through, how long did your determination last?”

CONTEXT

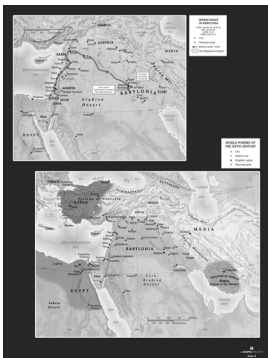
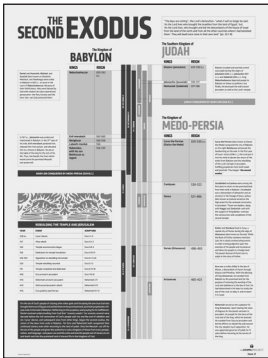
TRANSITION: A lot of times our resolutions fall flat when we lose motivation. Or perhaps we find our goals were not realistic or required too much sacrifice. In contrast, Daniel 1 motivates and inspires us to determine to serve, obey, and follow God despite our circumstances. Daniel and his friends show us that obeying God is always the best decision. Trusting the Lord to find a way for our obedience where there doesn’t seem to be a way is always better than the alternative.

HIGHLIGHT: Display **Pack Item 2: The Second Exodus** and **Pack Item 4: Babylon and the Exile Map** to help visualize the following context points for today’s study. Say: “Daniel and his friends were subject to an early exile to Babylon some years before the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. King Nebuchadnezzar came to Jerusalem and took the cream of the crop of Judah’s population back to Babylon, almost a nine-hundred-mile journey away from their home. This wasn’t a scholarship program for their sake, however. Nebuchadnezzar wanted the best of Judah’s society to assimilate and advocate for Babylonian culture. It was in this context that Daniel and his friends determined to obey the Lord.”

RECAP

ASK: Whether this story is familiar or not, from your personal preparation this week, what details strike you as most important for understanding the passage?

TRANSITION: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah had a difficult choice put before them. They could obey the Babylonian king and gain his favor by abandoning their beliefs and convictions, or they could remain steadfast in their faith in God and face the potential consequences. Let’s consider their reasons, and ours, for striving to fear and obey the Lord over men.



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Notes

DISCUSS: How had King Nebuchadnezzar already asserted his earthly power over Daniel and his friends? What consequences from the king could have fallen upon them for their principled obedience to the Lord? What were the results of the friends' fear of the Lord and their obedience to Him? (*the Lord gave them knowledge, understanding, and wisdom, and the Lord gave Daniel the gift of understanding visions and dreams [v. 17]; Daniel and his friends excelled in their service to the king [vv. 19-20]*) How does this narrative exemplify the truth of Proverbs 1:7?

DEBRIEF

How do our decisions dictate our actions?

(PSG p. 22) What reasons do we have to fear the Lord and obey His commands?

SUMMARIZE

Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food or wine. Because they feared the Lord above all, Daniel and his friends were able to hold fast to their resolve and stay true to their beliefs and convictions—they obeyed the Lord. If Daniel had feared the king and his earthly power, succumbed to temptation, and eaten what he wanted, the king of Babylon would not have seen the wisdom and power of God in him.

HEAD, HEART, HANDS

Walk the group through the Head, Heart, Hands section in the PSG (p. 23). If running short on time, specifically highlight the **Hands** section in this week's study, inviting volunteers to share their responses to the question in this section.



HEAD: Daniel didn't give into his circumstances. He kept his wits about him, believing the Lord more than the king of Babylon was worthy of his fear and obedience. That's instructive for us as believers in Jesus. When life isn't going as expected, we are never without the kindness of almighty God. We can go to the Lord in prayer and ask Him for wisdom to see His work in our lives as well as the determination to obey Him above all.

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



HEART: We likely will not be taken to a foreign land, indoctrinated in a foreign culture, and fed foreign food, but we all will face suffering. Daniel's life helps us see that even in suffering—even in exile—God is still at work and worthy of our obedience. Israel was punished for their sin, but God had not given up on them. He was still with Daniel and his friends. He was still their God. When your life doesn't go as planned, He will still be your God too.

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



HANDS: Daniel's faith wasn't private. Everyone around him knew where he stood—with the Lord. Because of this, Daniel was persecuted for his faithfulness, but he never wavered. In that regard, Daniel is a type of Christ, who never wavered even in the face of suffering on the cross to take away our sins. *(Pass out copies of Pack Item 3: Seeing Jesus in the Exile and Return to help make this connection and others throughout the volume.)* Jesus's faithfulness was for our benefit, securing forgiveness and justification through His death and resurrection. True faith is never private but active in the real world. It was for Daniel and Jesus. It should be for us as well.

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

NEXT STEPS

Challenge the group to consider these actions as responses to this session.

- Consider any decisions you need to make today that will impact your future actions, such as a commitment to Bible study, praying for lost loved ones, or sharing the gospel with others.
- Address habits or behaviors that may give an unbeliever the wrong idea of what it means to follow Christ.
- The fact that Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah also stood strong with Daniel may have made it easier to obey God. Whom can you encourage to remain steadfast in godly living this week?

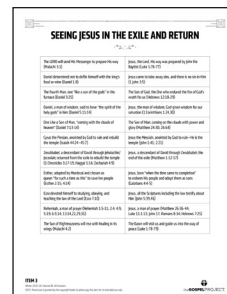
Invite volunteers to share prayer needs for this week. Encourage them to record these in the space on page 23 in their PSG so they can pray for others throughout the week.

PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES

PRAYING SCRIPTURE

CLOSE: Pray through Psalm 112:4-9 with your group. Thank God that He blesses those who fear and obey Him, both in good and bad times.

Notes



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.

As you examine Daniel 3:14-18,24-29:

- Recognize that the three friends' courage stemmed from their belief that God could be trusted in life or death.
- Notice how Nebuchadnezzar recognized God's power and gave Him the praise He deserved because of the three friends' faithful testimony.



TIMELINE

Daniel and His Friends
Remain Faithful to God's
Dietary Laws (Daniel 1)

SESSION STUDY:
**Daniel's Friends Refuse to Worship
Nebuchadnezzar's Statue (Daniel 3)**

Daniel Interprets the Writing on
the Wall for Belshazzar (Daniel 5)

Daniel Interprets Nebuchadnezzar's
First Dream (Daniel 2)

Daniel Interprets Nebuchadnezzar's
Second Dream (Daniel 4)

Daniel Is Thrown into the
Lions' Den (Daniel 6)

Daily Readings

- ☐ **Day 1:** Daniel 3
- ☐ **Day 2:** Daniel 4
- ☐ **Day 3:** Obadiah

- ☐ **Day 4:** Ezekiel 40–44
- ☐ **Day 5:** Ezekiel 45–48
- ☐ **Day 6:** Psalm 14



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

GOD IS ALWAYS ABLE TO SAVE (DANIEL 3:14-18).

Circle all the conjunctions, the connecting words, in the passage (and, but, if, then, when, etc.).

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.”

King Nebuchadnezzar set up a gold statue to be the center of worship for his subjects. But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (previously called Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah) determined not to bow to it—they worshiped the Lord alone, even while facing a gruesome death. Some Chaldeans, likely jealous these Jews were set over Babylon’s affairs, told the king these three men would not serve his gods nor worship his statue, which enraged the king (vv. 1-13).

Daniel’s friends determined to obey God’s commandments: “Do not have other gods besides me. Do not make an idol for yourself” (Ex. 20:3-4). So Nebuchadnezzar, himself jealous for the worship and total submission of his subjects, did what all people do who set themselves against the one true God—he persecuted God’s faithful people, threatening them with death by fire.

LEADER NOTE: These three men faced a very real threat. Standing before the king, perhaps they saw the furnace in the distance. Their earthly lives seemed to be in Nebuchadnezzar’s hands. At the same time, these three men saw the ultimate weakness and smallness of Nebuchadnezzar compared to the Lord. They believed in the almighty, sovereign power of their very real God. Like Jesus’s apostles after them, they could have said, “We must obey God rather than people” (Acts 5:29). Perhaps Peter had Daniel’s three friends in mind when he said those words before those who crucified Jesus.

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

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

The persecution coming for these three courageous Jews was a very real threat, yet they saw this as an opportunity for them to give glory to God. Nebuchadnezzar mocked their God, claiming to have supreme power in this matter (Dan. 3:15). Still, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego remained firm in their faith. They would worship God alone, no matter the outcome. The Lord could rescue them with a miracle, but He might not. Both were acceptable outcomes because the Lord alone is the true God who is worthy of worship.

Notes

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.

These friends embodied Paul's words from Philippians 1:21: "For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." For the Christian, there is no losing situation. As Jesus said, "Don't fear those who kill the body but are not able to kill the soul; rather, fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28). The reverent fear of God is the end of all other earthly fears.

LEADER NOTE: Jesus told His disciples they would be persecuted for His name (Matt. 10:16-18). Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were forerunners for those courageous disciples, and for us. They knew they faced the king's fury not because of a failure of faith but precisely because of their faith, and they trusted God with the outcome.

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

VOICES FROM CHURCH HISTORY

"Let faith be yours, and God will be with you in your trouble."¹
—Augustine of Hippo (c. 354–430)

GOD SAVES SO THAT ALL WOULD KNOW HE IS THE MOST HIGH GOD (DANIEL 3:24-29).

Circle every instance of God or gods in the passage.

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.”

The courage of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego sent Nebuchadnezzar into a rage. The furnace was heated seven times hotter than normal—so hot that his best soldiers who threw them in died from the heat (vv. 19-23). But the three did not die because the living God was among them.

Nebuchadnezzar himself was the one to notice the fourth man, an “angel” of God (v. 28), walking in the fire with the other three. The king who believed he had power over life and death was beholding a supreme power unlike any he could achieve. The flames of man cannot extinguish the glory of God!

LEADER NOTE: Long before the Babylonian exile, the prophet Isaiah prophesied: “When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, and the flame will not burn you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, and your Savior” (Isa. 43:2-3). Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were in exile due to God’s judgment on their nation, but the Lord had not forsaken them. Perhaps this promise from Isaiah came to their minds as they roamed inside the furnace. They trusted in God’s power, and He was with them (v. 5).

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

God’s rescue of His servants was not for their sake only. Their preservation brought glory to God. Imagine it! The king who had ridiculed the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego now praised the very same God. What a turnaround!

The three friends risked their lives to serve God, and God came through. That’s a truth that rings through the ages. Whatever threat God’s people face, it is nothing compared to God’s power. He has all authority in heaven and on earth, and He laughs at the schemes of the wicked (Ps. 2:1-4). Nothing can move God from His throne, and nothing can thwart His plan of salvation for His people.

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

Not every fiery trial will end like this, however. Not everyone who stands up for God and His gospel survives the punishment of worldly kings. That doesn’t make God a failure. He is always powerful and glorious. No, flames can only kill the body. God can raise up the body again. Jesus was raised from death to life, and He will raise up everyone who trusts in Him on the last day (John 6:39-40).

LEADER NOTE: In the New Testament, Peter encouraged his brothers and sisters in Christ who endured persecution from Rome, saying: “Dear friends, don’t be surprised when the fiery ordeal comes among you to test you, as if something unusual were happening to you. Instead, rejoice as you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may also rejoice with great joy when his glory is revealed” (1 Pet. 4:12-13). Even Jesus Himself, the Son of God, was not saved from an unjust death but went through the indignity of the cross and faced God’s wrath to save us from sin and the punishment we deserve. Because of Jesus, we believers may face man’s wrath but never God’s, and we will receive His promised gift of eternal life.

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.

ARRIVAL

ENGAGE: Before the session, write “Would You Rather?” on a board or large sheet of paper. As the group arrives, invite people to write two silly but frightening choices, such as “Give a speech on national television or sing the national anthem at the Super Bowl? Go skydiving or deep-sea diving?” When ready, call out the choices and invite the group to raise their hands to show which choice they would prefer. You might also give some people a chance to explain their choices.

CONTEXT

SAY: Some time after Daniel and his friends entered King Nebuchadnezzar’s service, the king had a frightening dream that none of his wise men could interpret (Dan. 2). Daniel and his friends, however, prayed for God to reveal the dream and its meaning, and God did. When Daniel revealed and interpreted the king’s dream, Nebuchadnezzar said, “Your God is indeed God of gods, Lord of kings, and a revealer of mysteries, since you were able to reveal this mystery” (v. 47). But in today’s Bible story, Nebuchadnezzar seems to have forgotten his declaration, as he built a golden statue and demanded everyone bow down to worship it. Daniel’s three friends, however, chose not to bow.

RECAP

ASK: Based on your personal preparation this week, how would you frame a “Would You Rather?” question for King Nebuchadnezzar? For Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego?

TRANSITION: At times in our lives, we have to decide between two or more choices that test our priorities. Daniel and his friends previously had chosen to obey the Lord over the king regarding food, risking a demotion, or worse. This time, the king personally made Daniel’s friends choose between worshiping a golden statue or immediately being thrown into a fiery furnace. As faithful worshipers of the living God, this really wasn’t a choice. The Lord alone deserved their worship and glory. Can the same be said about us? Let’s talk about it.



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GROUP ACTIVITY

CHART: Direct your group to page 30 in their Personal Study Guide (PSG), where they will find a chart titled “Modern-Day Statues and Furnaces.” Recreate this chart on a board in your room so you can record the group’s responses.

Modern-Day Statues and Furnaces

Read Daniel 3:14-18,24-29. Identify some modern-day “statues” that demand worship and modern-day “furnaces” we may face for upholding the gospel.

MODERN DAY GOLDEN STATUES	MODERN-DAY FIERY FURNACES

READ: Call for a volunteer to read Daniel 3:14-18.

ANALYZE: Invite the group to form small groups of 3-4. Say: “Although most of us will never be asked to worship a golden statue, there are plenty of idols that we will be asked to worship or that will vie for our attention.” Guide the groups to create a list in the PSG of modern-day “statues” believers are expected to go along with. After a few minutes of discussion, invite a volunteer from each group to call out their findings. Record these in the left column on the board. Suggest adults write down other groups’ findings on their own chart in the PSG.

SAY: Nebuchadnezzar was furious the three men would choose not to worship the statue he had made, so he had them thrown into the fiery furnace. Jesus said His followers would face persecution by those who hated Him. (Read Matthew 10:16-20.) Though we may not face a fiery furnace, we should expect consequences for standing firm for the sake of the gospel.

Notes

NO MATTER THE COST		
THE THREAT	DEATH-DEFYING FAITH	THE REWARD
SHADRACH, MESHACH, AND ABEDNEGO	Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to bow down to the golden statue. They were thrown into the furnace, but God miraculously protected them, and they came out unharmed. (Daniel 3:1-18)	They were promoted to higher positions in the Babylonian court. (Daniel 3:19-30)
THE THREE YOUNG MEN	The three young men refused to bow down to the golden statue. They were thrown into the furnace, but God miraculously protected them, and they came out unharmed. (Daniel 3:1-18)	They were promoted to higher positions in the Babylonian court. (Daniel 3:19-30)
THE THREE YOUNG MEN	The three young men refused to bow down to the golden statue. They were thrown into the furnace, but God miraculously protected them, and they came out unharmed. (Daniel 3:1-18)	They were promoted to higher positions in the Babylonian court. (Daniel 3:19-30)
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THE THREE YOUNG MEN	The three young men refused to bow down to the golden statue. They were thrown into the furnace, but God miraculously protected them, and they came out unharmed. (Daniel 3:1-18)	They were promoted to higher positions in the Babylonian court. (Daniel 3:19-30)

INSTRUCT: Pass out copies of **Pack Item 5: No Matter the Cost** and briefly review the threats faced by God's people. Direct the groups to discuss what consequences believers today might experience for courageously proclaiming and living out the gospel. After a few minutes, call for volunteers from each group to identify potential consequences, such as losing a job, losing friendships, and in some places of the world, even imprisonment or death. Record their answers in the right column of the chart and guide adults to write them in their PSG. Say: "Persecution of various forms is nothing new for those who worship the living God. But these potential consequences are not the end of the story for believers."

READ: Invite a volunteer to read Daniel 3:24-29.

SUMMARIZE: As in the case of Daniel's friends, the Lord preserved their lives in the fire, though we should note He did not prevent them from going into the fire. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego affirmed that the Lord is God and that He has the power to rescue His people if that is His will, but even if He doesn't, He alone is still worthy of our worship (vv. 16-18). To grasp the implications of this affirmation, we must fix our eyes on Jesus, the perfect Son of God who suffered the cross and death according to the Father's will for our salvation (Heb. 12:1-3). So, when the world plays the "music" and expects us to bow, look to Jesus, who was raised from the dead to give us the courage to stand firm.

DEBRIEF

How can we fix our eyes on Jesus instead of golden statues the world offers?

How can we encourage other believers who are facing fiery furnaces?

SUMMARIZE

The power God used to rescue Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego is the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. Neither fire nor death can stop God from fulfilling His will. The Lord is all-powerful, and He's always in control. So no matter the "Would You Rather?" scenario we may face, may we always choose the courageous path of trust, obedience, and worship for the Lord.

HEAD, HEART, HANDS

Walk the group through the Head, Heart, Hands section in the PSG (p. 31). If running short on time, specifically highlight the **Heart** section in this week's study, inviting volunteers to share their responses to the question in this section.



HEAD: Miracles in the Bible can be disorienting. But taking God at His word means taking all of His Word to heart—even the miracles. After all, to believe in God at all is to believe in a miracle. Your faith is a miracle. Your life in Christ is a miracle. You may not have seen three men rescued from a fire, but have you seen a Christian, even in the mirror? Then you've seen a miracle.

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



HEART: Courage is a heart posture, a reliance upon God no matter the cost. Jesus doesn't coddle us but tells us the truth—we will have suffering in this world, but He also said He has overcome the world (John 16:33). No wonder the most repeated command in the Bible is “Do not fear” because “If God is for us, who is against us?” (Rom. 8:31).

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



HANDS: Courage is faith displayed. We inevitably will run into obstacles, temptations, and hard decisions while following Jesus. Yet these are opportunities to show courage in Christ, knowing that He has saved us by grace through faith and has given us His gift of eternal life.

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

NEXT STEPS

Challenge the group to consider these actions as responses to this session.

- Read Matthew 10:16-20. Reflect on Jesus's promise that the Holy Spirit will give us the words and courage to stand firm.
- Consider how the various areas of your life need to be adjusted to ensure you are not conforming to the ways of this world but conforming to Christ.
- Share with someone in your group how you will stand firm for the gospel this week, and invite a followup conversation later in the week.

Invite volunteers to share prayer needs for this week. Encourage them to record these in the space on page 31 in their PSG so they can pray for others throughout the week.

PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES

PRAYING SCRIPTURE

CLOSE: Pray through Psalm 14:4-6 with your group, thanking God that while the wicked world is spinning out of control, He is a refuge to those who trust in Him.

References

1. Augustine of Hippo, quoted in Kenneth Stevenson and Michael Gluerup, eds., *Ezekiel, Daniel, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 183.

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.

As you examine Daniel 6:13-24:

- Recognize that Daniel felt honoring God with his life was more important than preserving it.
- Consider that when we are falsely accused, we can rest in God's justice.



TIMELINE

Daniel and His Friends Serve
Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 1-4)

Babylon Is Conquered by Darius the Mede,
Who Is Cyrus of Persia (Daniel 5)

SESSION STUDY: Daniel Is Thrown
into the Lions' Den (Daniel 6)

Daniel Interprets the Writing on
the Wall for Belshazzar (Daniel 5)

Cyrus of Persia Issues Decree Allowing
the Jews to Return to Judah (Ezra 1)

Daily Readings

- | | |
|--|---|
| <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 |



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

FAITHFULNESS INCLUDES LIVING OUT OUR FAITH WHEN PERSECUTED (DANIEL 6:13-18).

Circle the charge for which Daniel was being persecuted and the way the king described Daniel's actions.

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.

It's difficult to find a more faithful response to a political act than what Daniel displayed in Daniel 6. When he learned of the edict to pray to no one but the king for thirty days, he went to his house, faced Jerusalem, and got down on his knees to pray (vv. 1-10). Daniel's response was to do what he had always done—pray to God alone despite what the world around him demanded.

This edict was a scheme of the satraps and administrators who set themselves against Daniel. Pay attention to this fact, for it is remarkable. Daniel was so faithful to God that his enemies could find no other way to bring him down than to use his faithfulness against him (vv. 4-5). Therefore, they made a new law so they could catch Daniel in the act of civil disobedience by doing what he always did—praying (vv. 6-9).

LEADER NOTE: Daniel had served foreign kings with distinction and boldness. He warned Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 4), and he confronted Belshazzar (Dan. 5). Then he served Darius. Daniel was by far the king's best administrator, and he had "an extraordinary spirit," so the king planned to put him in charge of everything (6:3). It may be difficult for us to imagine our faith could lead to success in this sinful world, but Daniel proved it can, as did Joseph (Gen. 41). Yet there is an important caveat: Our faith may lead us to rise in responsibility, but it may just as well lead us to the lions' den. True faith recognizes we are in God's hands to do as He wills—to serve as He would have us regardless of the circumstances and outcomes.

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

Once Daniel's haters had the evidence, they wasted no time bringing it to the king's attention. They had thought out the plan fully. They knew Darius would try to find a way to free Daniel because he was such a good servant. So they leaned on the law that any edict passed by the king was irrevocable, even by the king who passed it. The king's hands were tied by his own signature. Duped by his own administration, the king had Daniel thrown to the lions.

Why would God allow such a thing to happen to a man who continually served Him (Dan. 6:16)? Shouldn't faithfulness prevent such suffering? The answer, according to Scripture, is no. In fact, Jesus Himself said that we would suffer for His sake (John 15:20). When we face persecution for the sake of Christ, it is the faith He grants that gives us the strength to endure. His resurrection power arises within us and reminds us that even if the lions devour us, all they can do is usher us into our Savior's hands.

LEADER NOTE: Daniel was put into a cave, essentially a tomb, and its entrance was covered with a stone and legally sealed so that Daniel's death sentence would be sealed (Dan. 6:16-17). Similarly, Jesus's body, after His crucifixion, was placed in a carved-out tomb, and a stone was placed against its entrance with a seal (Matt. 27:59-60,66). Daniel faced hungry lions but miraculously came out alive. Jesus, having already suffered death at the hands of human beings, went into the tomb as a corpse, but He too came out alive. In this, Daniel is a type of Christ, as both were faithful unto death, figurative and literal respectively, and both were raised up.

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

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.

THOSE WHO DO NOT LIVE IN FAITH WILL FACE PUNISHMENT AND DEATH (DANIEL 6:19-24).

Underline the reason Daniel was spared from death in the lions' den.

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.

Daniel's wisdom in serving the king and his faithfulness in prayer landed him in the lions' den, yet only one action was noted for his survival there—"he trusted in his God" (v. 23). As the king ran to the tomb in anguish, he hoped Daniel was spared. Logic and reason told Darius that it could not be so. Everyone knew the elderly Daniel could not have fended off the lions himself. They were kept hungry for such an occasion. If Daniel were spared, even Darius knew only one person could have done it—the living God—and He did.

God's power is immense. He is omnipotent. There is nothing God cannot do, especially as simple to Him as shutting lions' mouths. But it was God's faithfulness to His holy name that compelled His strength. Through Daniel, God was proving the kind of God He is. He is not capricious. His edicts are everlasting and just, made in righteousness, not vanity. The living God alone is worthy of worship, and Daniel's experience in the lions' den proved it.

LEADER NOTE: God's justice led not only to the accusers' condemnation but also to Daniel's salvation. Daniel was not a perfect man—only Jesus is—but he was a good man who truly loved the Lord and was faithful in worshipping Him alone. Verse 23 states that Daniel was saved because he trusted in his God. It's not the strength of our faith that saves us but the strength of the One in whom we place our faith, and there is no one stronger than God.

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.

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

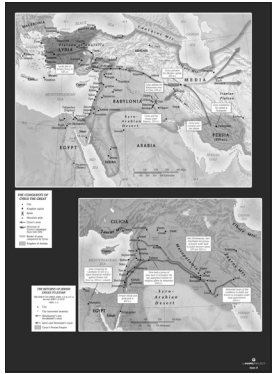
The administrators and satraps tried to paint Daniel as an unfaithful betrayer of the king because Daniel's highest allegiance was to his God. But Daniel and King Darius counted him acquitted of the charge since the living God rescued him from the lions. So Darius turned the tables on the accusers, who had manipulated the king for their own benefit and who would have deprived the king of his most effective administrator.

By the king's command, the accusers, along with their families, suffered the fate they had plotted out for their enemy. Yet ultimately, the judgment of God fell upon their houses for their faithlessness of attacking God's man, as seen in the fact that the lions that had passed over Daniel devoured them immediately.

LEADER NOTE: It may trouble us that the families of the accusers were executed as well. But the comment is made without approval or disapproval. It was Darius's decision to make, and he made it. Darius recognized God's power, but that doesn't mean he became a believer and follower that day. He was still the king of Persia with the king of Persia's appetites and sense of right and wrong.

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

Notes



ARRIVAL

INTERACT: As the group arrives, ask if they have experienced a time when they were caught red-handed doing something they had been told not to do. Then ask if anyone has experienced a time when they were caught doing something good when they thought no one else was watching.

CONTEXT

TRANSITION: Did you know the word “integrity” comes from the Latin root word from which we get *integer*, as in the math term for a whole number? Jeff Long stated, “A person of integrity is a whole, complete, undivided person—not segmented or fractionalized. No double-dealing, no double standards, and no double meanings!”¹ That was Daniel, a man of integrity.

SUMMARIZE: Daniel made his way up in the ranks of the kingdom, or kingdoms, actually. He proved over and over that he was a man of integrity, strength, and wisdom. He even had the affection of the new king of the new kingdom, Darius the Mede, whom we also know as Cyrus the Persian. (You might consider posting **Pack Item 9: Persia and the Return Map** to show the expansion of the Persian Empire in conquering Babylon.) Darius planned to put Daniel in charge of the entire kingdom. But some who were jealous of Daniel took advantage of his faith and practice to bring him down. Knowing that Daniel was a praying man, they convinced the king to sign an edict that for thirty days, anyone who prayed to any god other than the king would be thrown into a den of lions. Despite the very real threat of death, Daniel continued to pray to God three times a day as he had always done. His enemies were thrilled and went running to the king.

RECAP

ENGAGE: From your personal preparation this week, what stood out to you about the motivations and actions of King Darius toward Daniel? Of Daniel toward the Lord and the king?

TRANSITION: This was not the first time Daniel faced the choice to obey God or the king. No doubt he knew what had happened to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego when they refused to bow to Nebuchadnezzar’s statue years before. This time, the enemies of God’s faithful people specifically targeted Daniel because of God’s blessing upon him and his faithfulness to the Lord.



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

GROUP ACTIVITY

CHART: Direct your group to page 38 in their Personal Study Guide (PSG), where they will find a chart titled “Daniel’s Faithfulness.” Recreate this chart on a board in your room so you can record the group’s responses.

Daniel's Faithfulness	
Read Daniel 6:13-24. Record the differences in the ways Daniel and his accusers related to the Lord and to the king.	
FAITHFUL SERVANT	FAITHLESS ACCUSERS
THE LORD	
THE KING	

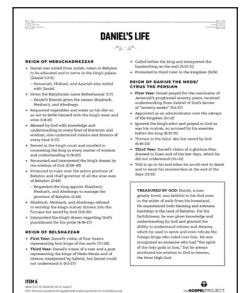
READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud Daniel 6:13-18.

IDENTIFY: Call for the group to identify ways Daniel and his accusers interacted with the Lord and/or the king in this passage, making sure to include the appropriate verse references. Allow the group to draw on what they may have studied from the first part of Daniel 6 in their personal preparation. Record the group’s conclusions on the board.

ANALYZE: Pass out copies of **Pack Item 6: Daniel's Life** and briefly review Daniel's example of faithfulness, wisdom, and humility. Suggest your group take a moment to ponder what the everyday lives of the people in the kingdom would have been like to have someone with Daniel's integrity in charge of the administration. Ask: “The king was pleased with Daniel and prepared to put him in charge of the entire kingdom. Yet other administrators hated Daniel. Why do you think they hated him and sought to have him killed?”

READ: Invite another volunteer to read Daniel 6:19-24.

Notes



IDENTIFY: Call again for the group to identify the ways Daniel and his accusers acted toward the Lord and/or the king from this second passage. As necessary, highlight the following key phrases from the passage for response from the group: Daniel said “God sent His angel and shut the lions’ mouths” (v. 22); “I was found innocent before him” (v. 22); “before you, Your Majesty, I have not done harm” (v. 22). Ask: “With these thoughts about Daniel’s actions, what can we infer about his accusers, seeing that the lions devoured them immediately?”

DEBRIEF

How did Daniel’s life of integrity impact the people around him, both positively and negatively?

What are some ways we can show faithfulness to God in our spheres of influence?

SUMMARIZE

Daniel was faithful in every way. He was faithful at work, at home, and especially in his faith. He didn’t try to hide his faith; in fact, he prayed with the window wide open. As believers in Jesus, we don’t have to fear the persecution we may face because we know that God is with us. God doesn’t promise that He will save us from persecution, but we do know that He’s there with us every step of the way. And even when we are not faithful, He is.

HEAD, HEART, HANDS

Walk the group through the Head, Heart, Hands section in the PSG (p. 39). If running short on time, specifically highlight the **Heart** section in this week’s study, inviting volunteers to share their responses to the question in this section.



HEAD: Faith is often seen as less real than reason, as if reason were the basis for all that exists and faith were a fantasy some people live in. But the Christian faith is not a leap in the dark. It is not a vague hope. It is a trust placed in the living God. Faith is looking at the world and seeing behind it all the mighty hand of God at work. Reason alone isn’t enough. It can’t explain all that happens in this world. But faith in God can sustain us through it all.

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



HEART: Daniel’s outward faith was driven by his inward trust in God. He knew God loved him, and that allowed him to live fearlessly in the world. Knowing God loves us radically changes how we live. We can rest in His unchanging nature. We can rest in His grace, knowing that the salvation He accomplished for us in Christ is all we will ever need. We don’t have to fear whatever this world might throw at us because Christ has overcome it.

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



HANDS: True faith is never without works but always leads to an outward expression of trust in God (see Jas. 2:26). Daniel's expression of faith led to a night spent in the lions' den, but that was okay with Daniel. He knew God loved him. If you know God loves you, it puts steel in your spine to stand against whatever schemes the devil and this world throw at you.

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

NEXT STEPS

Challenge the group to consider these actions as responses to this session.

- Take some time to list ways God has been faithful to you in the last year.
- There's an idea that Christians should be better members of the community because our standards are higher (Phil. 2:14-15; Col. 3:17). Daniel lived this way. Consider how you can show faithfulness to God in your work, your church, and your family for God's glory.
- In our part of the world, we may not face threats of death for our faith, though we could, but the Bible says that anyone who seeks to live a godly life will be persecuted (2 Tim. 3:12). Ask God to give you a bold faith and strength to face persecution, and pray for those who are being persecuted for Christ around the world.

Invite volunteers to share prayer needs for this week. Encourage them to record these in the space on page 39 in their PSG so they can pray for others throughout the week.

PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES

PRAYING SCRIPTURE

CLOSE: Pray through Psalm 91:1-8 with your group. Thank the Lord for being our refuge and fortress and for being a just God who rescues His people and punishes the wicked. Pray for faith and boldness to proclaim Jesus and His gospel, trusting the Lord to rescue in His wisdom and timing.

References

1. Jeff Iorg, *The Character of Leadership: Nine Qualities That Define Great Leaders* (Nashville: B&H Books, 2007), 24.

THE DOCTRINE OF THE KINGDOM

By Greg Kilgore



You may have heard it said jokingly that “Americans have no king but Elvis.” The United States often prides itself in not having a king since the Revolutionary War. In many Western nations, there are presidents or prime ministers, but these leaders are not all-powerful sovereigns. Many people today do not really understand the idea of an all-powerful king. Most of the titles surrounding kings in the West come simply from honorary titles, such as homecoming kings.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE KING AND HIS KINGDOM

Why is the kingdom of God important for Christians? God’s rule and reign is one of the major themes of the entire Bible. The kingdom is centered on Christ, and many prophecies in the Old Testament predict the coming King who will rule and reign perfectly over His people. Zechariah 9 presented the King as coming to Jerusalem to bring salvation to His people. Daniel 7 promised a coming kingdom that will be eternal and comprehensive—everything will be subject to the coming King’s authority and dominion.

Additionally, the importance of the kingdom is seen in how many times Jesus speaks of the kingdom in His ministry. The kingdom is mentioned 126 times in the Gospels; thus, it is one of the dominant themes of Christ’s teaching ministry.

GOD’S GENERAL SOVEREIGNTY

What does it mean that Christians are part of the kingdom of God? Even if we have never lived under the rule of a king in our own country, we can understand the rule of Christ as King. The kingdom of God is made up of God’s general rule over all and

Christ’s particular kingship over His people who trust in Him as their Lord and Savior. Most statements of faith describe God’s kingdom and His rule. The Baptist Faith and Message, for example, identifies these categories this way: “The Kingdom of God includes both His general sovereignty over the universe and His particular kingship over men who willfully acknowledge Him as King.”¹

As we consider this statement, the question “Why is God king?” might arise. Ultimately, it is due to Him creating the universe (Gen. 1–2). Psalm 103:19 states, “The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all.” God alone has the power to create and rule His universe. Thus, the first part of God’s kingdom is His general rule and reign over the universe.

The entrance
into the kingdom of
Christ is cross- and
resurrection-shaped.

The kingdom is mentioned 126 times in the Gospels;
thus, it is one of the dominant themes
of Christ's teaching ministry.

CHRIST'S PARTICULAR KINGSHIP

The second element of the kingdom includes Christ's kingship over those who acknowledge Him as King: "Particularly the Kingdom is the realm of salvation into which men enter by trustful, child-like commitment to Jesus Christ."² This means that the second element of the kingdom entails the saving rule and reign of Christ in our hearts and lives.

People do not enter this kingdom by any earthly means. Entrance into the kingdom of Christ does not come on the basis of earthly merit, power, or nationality. How, then, do we enter this saving kingdom of Christ? When Jesus was talking with Nicodemus, He said, "Truly I tell you, unless someone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). We enter this kingdom through the spiritual birth that takes place at conversion. We enter Christ's kingdom by being born again. We enter this kingdom by knowing and loving the King. The entrance into the kingdom of Christ is cross- and resurrection-shaped. Through trusting in Jesus Christ's perfect life, death, and resurrection, we enter this saving rule of Christ in His particular kingdom.

Every single person is under the rule of God as king because they are part of His universe. However, we enter the particular kingdom that is marked by salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

OUR ROLE IN THE KINGDOM

For those who have trusted in Christ, we have a role to play in this kingdom. Even though God's rule is established, Christ's saving kingdom has not yet fully arrived here and now. When we read the New Testament, we see the emphasis on the return of Christ to establish His reign fully and finally in the new heavens and new earth. As believers, we live between the times, that is, between the beginning of the end and the "full consummation" of Christ's eternal reign.

The kingdom was inaugurated with Jesus's first advent. Through God's Word and Spirit, we are called to life under His lordship, where we are freely accepted and forgiven. This also means that we are committed to Jesus's kingdom priorities in the age to come and seek to work them out in our own lives and in the present age as well.

Until Christ returns, every local church is meant to be a gospel outpost of the kingdom of God, and every Christian is meant to be an ambassador of Jesus's kingdom in this world (2 Cor. 5:20).

References

1. "XI. The Kingdom," *The Baptist Faith and Message* (Nashville: Southern Baptist Convention, 2025) <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/#xi>.
2. *The Baptist Faith and Message*, XI.

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DOMINION

CORE PASSAGE: DANIEL 7:2-14

CONTEXT

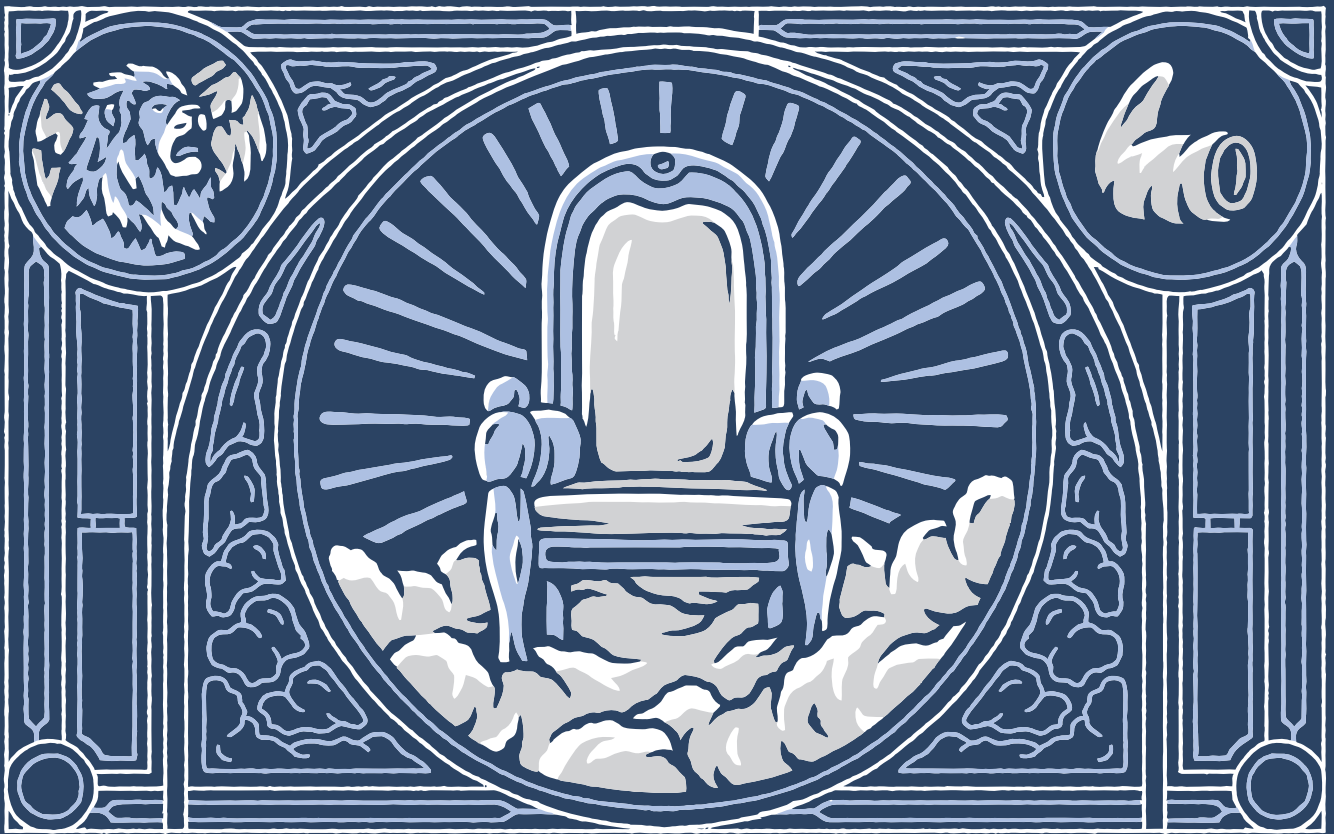
The book of Daniel is divided into two main parts. The first six chapters are narratives, such as the fiery furnace, the writing on the wall, and the lions' den. The last six chapters contain four visions of the future the Lord gave to Daniel as a prophet. Daniel 7 is the pivot point bridging the two 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.

As you examine Daniel 7:2-14:

- Recognize that because of sin, human empires will try to establish dominion over this world.
- Rejoice that Christ is reigning and will reign and judge over all people at the end of time.



TIMELINE

Daniel and His Friends
Serve Nebuchadnezzar
(Daniel 1–4)

2: A Ram and a
Goat (Daniel 8)

Babylon Is Conquered by
Darius/Cyrus (Daniel 5)

Cyrus Issues Decree
Allowing the Jews to
Return to Judah (Ezra 1)

Daniel's Four Visions:
SESSION STUDY:
1: Four Beasts (Daniel 7)

Daniel Interprets the
Writing on the Wall for
Belshazzar (Daniel 5)

3: "Seventy Weeks"
(Daniel 9)

**4: A Glorious Man
and the Last Days**
(Daniel 10–12)

Daily Readings

☐ **Day 1:** Daniel 7

☐ **Day 2:** Daniel 8

☐ **Day 3:** Daniel 9

☐ **Day 4:** Daniel 10–11

☐ **Day 5:** Daniel 12

☐ **Day 6:** Psalm 93



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

**THOUGH OPPRESSIVE POWERS SEEM UNSTOPPABLE,
THEY ARE TEMPORARY (DANIEL 7:2-8).**

Highlight the descriptions of the four beasts using different colored pens.

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."

Careful readers will notice the similarities between the four beasts in this vision and Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the layered statue in chapter 2. Daniel's vision is divided into four sections, each describing a different beast and kingdom (see Dan. 7:15-28). There has been much discussion about which kingdoms the beasts represent, but the consensus among scholars is that the beasts represent Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome respectively.

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

LEADER NOTE: One reason this vision revealed the various kingdoms as beasts is because God wants us to see the ugliness and horror of power apart from Him. We may be among the oppressed, but we have within us the same evil desire for conflict, conquest, and control that leads to beastly kingdoms. At the micro-level, consider bad bosses and bad parents ruling with an iron fist and without mercy. Humanity without Christ is in an unending cycle of rising and falling kingdoms filled with pride and suffering.

The first beast was like a lion with an eagle's wings. The prophet Jeremiah used these images to describe Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon (Jer. 49:19-22). The wings were torn off, and later, the beast was lifted up from the ground and restored with a human mind (Dan. 7:4). These events correspond with Nebuchadnezzar's humiliation and restoration in Daniel 4.

The second beast looked like a bear on its side, feasting on some previous prey. Someone told it to get up and eat more. This beast represented the Medo-Persian kingdom of King Cyrus, who conquered the Babylonians.

The third beast was like a leopard with four wings and four heads. This represented Greece. The kingdom and army of Alexander the Great was certainly as swift as a leopard and as vast as a bird's flight through the air. The four heads may mean this beast was looking in all directions for prey.¹

The fourth and final beast, representing the kingdom of Rome, was the most terrifying of them all, so much so that it wasn't likened to any animal. With its incredible strength and large iron teeth, it devoured anything in its path, and anything that escaped the teeth was trampled by its feet. Significant among its ten horns was one little horn that came up and uprooted three others. It was personified with eyes and a mouth that communicated human arrogance and rebellion.

LEADER NOTE: The kingdoms of this world can be impressive but also incredibly oppressive. When control and sovereignty are threatened from without, the viciousness of war breaks out. Yet all kingdoms suffer from within to some degree because humanity is shot through with the sinful desire for power. All earthly kingdoms are defined by the sinful leaders and citizens who comprise them.

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

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.

GOD ALONE REIGNS SUPREME, AND EVERY OTHER KINGDOM IS SUBJECT TO HIS WILL AND JUDGMENT (DANIEL 7:9-14).

Circle the ways the Ancient of Days exercises His supreme authority over the kingdoms of the world.

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.

After contemplating the horror of the beastly kingdoms, we are refreshed through Daniel’s vision of the Ancient of Days on His supreme throne of judgment. Every human heart should long for this heavenly kingdom. No matter how bleak things look in one kingdom or the next, there is always hope with God. The Lord has not forgotten His people. His plan is not disrupted by any earthly kingdom nor any demonic spiritual influence. The Ancient of Days rules over them all.

LEADER NOTE: God’s title “Ancient of Days” contrasts Him with the up-and-coming kingdoms of this world. The Lord is forever. He’s not going anywhere, and no kingdom threatens His. God’s sovereign purposes and plans, though not fully understood by us, are paramount, and that is really good news. The almighty God is working all things out for His glory and our good (Rom. 8:28).

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

The beastly kingdoms of this world may think they are in control, but they are only sandcastles by the shore. God's kingdom is the ocean coming to knock them all down and wipe them all away. Their periods of dominance are in His hands, as is their very existence. And those rulers who would speak arrogantly should prepare themselves for the Lord's judgment. Nebuchadnezzar was brought low and then graciously restored (Dan. 4), but the arrogance of the little horn reaped its death and destruction by fire (7:11).

By contrast, there will be a kingdom instituted by the Ancient of Days that will far outweigh all the others. In Daniel 2, it is pictured as an untouched stone that destroyed the layered statue in Nebuchadnezzar's dream and then became a mountain filling the whole earth. Here in Daniel 7, we see this kingdom will be ruled by "one like a son of man . . . coming with the clouds of heaven" (v. 13). The dominion of the kingdoms was taken from them, but an everlasting and all-encompassing dominion is given to this righteous figure who is able to approach the Ancient of Days.

This "one like a son of man" is none other than the God-man, Jesus Christ. Prior to His crucifixion, Jesus foretold His heavenly enthronement and His coming judgment with the clouds of heaven (Matt. 26:64). After His resurrection, He ascended to the Father in the presence of a cloud, fulfilling this vision, and He will return the same way (Acts 1:9,11). For all the glory every beastly kingdom thinks it has, it pales in comparison to the kingdom God is bringing to earth through Jesus.

LEADER NOTE: While searching and studying Daniel 7 for the specifics of who and what each kingdom represents, let us not forget to focus on the main point: God's kingdom is the exact opposite of every earthly kingdom. The kingdoms of this world lead to oppression, conflict, conquest, and all other terrible things, but not God's kingdom. The Lord conquers through the death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus, and ushers His people into the kingdom by grace, freeing them from slavery to sin and death.

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

CHRIST CONNECTION

x

x

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).

ARRIVAL

ENGAGE: As your group arrives, ask them to describe the most vivid dream they've ever had. Plan to share a dream that you've experienced that really stood out to you to help break the ice, if necessary. Follow up with volunteers by asking if the dreams mentioned were frightening, silly, or eerily realistic.

CONTEXT

SUMMARIZE: The subject of visions and dreams was not new to Daniel. Twice for King Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel had interpreted the king's dreams that had specific spiritual and historical meanings. The Lord had given this gift to Daniel (1:17) and was the One who supplied Daniel with the understanding needed to interpret the dreams (2:19). But in the first year of King Belshazzar, some years before the handwriting on the wall incident, Daniel experienced a dream of his own with visions (7:1). This dream terrified him (v. 15), and its interpretation came not from himself but from a being within the dream, likely an angel (vv. 16-27). Daniel wrote down what he saw, which we have as the content of Daniel chapter 7, but he was so disturbed by what he saw that he didn't share this dream with anyone (vv. 1,28).

TRANSITION: Daniel kept these thoughts to himself on this occasion, but we have his account as the inspired Word of God for us to study and to hear from the Lord so that we can be encouraged in our faith.

RECAP

ENGAGE: Invite some bold volunteers to draw on a board their mental image of the beasts as understood from their personal preparation in Daniel 7 this week.

TRANSITION: Display **Pack Item 7: The Son of Man**. Say: "Daniel dreamed of four great beasts that came up from the sea, each representing a different kingdom, terrifying and destructive. But Daniel's vision also included a fifth kingdom. When things looked bleak for the earth and God's people, Daniel saw the Ancient of Days take His throne and give an eternal dominion to One like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven."



Listen to session-by-session training every week on

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

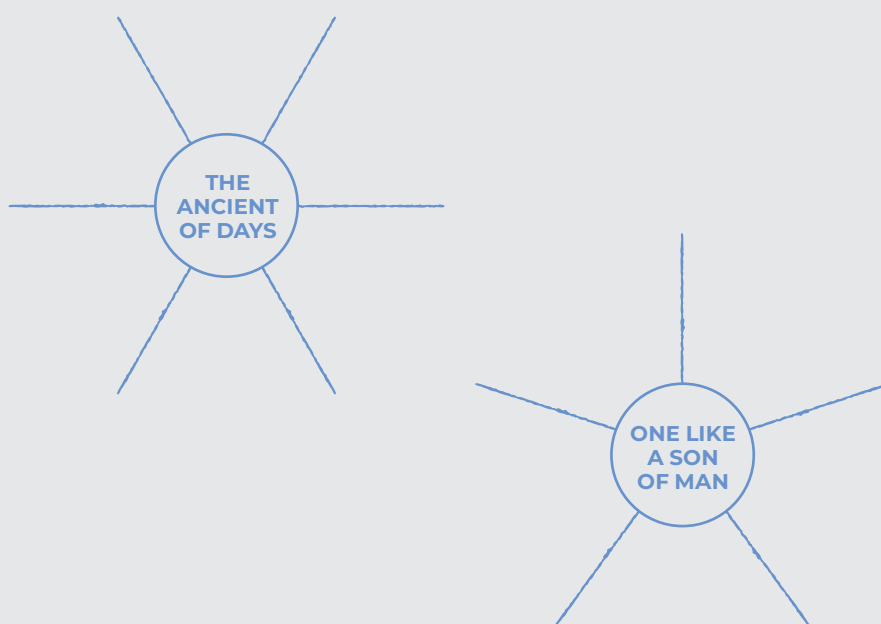
GROUP ACTIVITY

DIAGRAM: Direct your group to page 48 in their Personal Study Guide (PSG), where they will find an activity titled “The Ancient of Days and the Son of Man.” Recreate this diagram on a board in your room so you can record the group’s responses.

Notes

The Ancient of Days and the Son of Man

Read Daniel 7:9-14. Record in the gaps descriptions of “the Ancient of Days” and “one like a son of man,” especially as they contrast with the beasts.



READ: Pass out copies of **Pack Item 8: Visions in Daniel**, which summarizes the descriptions of the beasts in this vision, and invite a volunteer to read Daniel 7:2-8.

DISCUSS: “What would be your perspective on the world and its kingdoms if Daniel’s vision ended here?” After some discussion, say: “Thankfully, Daniel’s vision continues and gives us hope that rises above the arrogance and wickedness rooted in the kingdoms of this world.”

READ: Invite a volunteer to read Daniel 7:9-14.

DISCUSS: Say: “Daniel 7 introduces us to two significant figures: ‘the Ancient of Days’ and ‘one like a son of man.’ From the rest of Scripture, we can identify these figures as God the Father and God the Son—Jesus—respectively.” Lead the group in identifying and recording how this passage speaks of these figures, especially as they contrast with the beastly kingdoms of this world. (*Examples:*

VISIONS IN DANIEL			
	A BEASTLY KINGDOM (DANIEL 2)	THE ANCIENT OF DAYS (DANIEL 7)	ONE LIKE A SON OF MAN (DANIEL 7)
VISION 1 (DANIEL 2)	Four kingdoms (Babylon, Media, Persia, Greece) represented by four beasts (lion, bear, leopard, eagle).	Not applicable.	Not applicable.
VISION 2 (DANIEL 7)	Four kingdoms (Babylon, Media, Persia, Greece) represented by four beasts (lion, bear, leopard, eagle).	The Ancient of Days, seated on a throne, with white hair and a robe like snow, surrounded by a host of angels.	One like a son of man, coming on the clouds of heaven, with a glory like the sun, and surrounded by a host of angels.
VISION 3 (DANIEL 8)	Two kingdoms (Babylon and Persia) represented by two beasts (ram and goat).	Not applicable.	Not applicable.
VISION 4 (DANIEL 9)	Not applicable.	Not applicable.	Not applicable.
VISION 5 (DANIEL 10)	Not applicable.	Not applicable.	Not applicable.
VISION 6 (DANIEL 11)	Not applicable.	Not applicable.	Not applicable.
VISION 7 (DANIEL 12)	Not applicable.	Not applicable.	Not applicable.

Notes

arrogant horn judged/destroyed by Ancient of Days; dominion removed from beasts but an everlasting dominion given to the one like a son of man) Ask: “How do these descriptions give us hope in this world of sin?”

SUMMARIZE: No matter how supreme and strong the kingdoms of this world may be with their oppression, temptations, and sin, they are temporary and passing away. The Lord will judge them and make all things right. And on top of that, He will give to His Son, our Savior, the divine “Son of Man” (Matt. 26:64), an everlasting kingdom of righteousness and peace, and all who trust in Him will receive that kingdom as well (Rev. 5).

DEBRIEF

How do the qualities of “the Ancient of Days” and “the Son of Man” help us?

SUMMARIZE

We will encounter evil in our everyday lives. We can turn on the news and see things that cause anxiety, stress, and worry. However, through this vision in Daniel, we see hope. The God we serve is not sitting idly by; He is all-powerful, almighty, and can destroy the evil in this world with a word—the Word. God sent Jesus, His Son, to save and redeem the world. His resulting kingdom will not perish. No amount of evil will ever win against the power and might of Jesus. He has already won the victory for us over sin and death.

HEAD, HEART, HANDS

Walk the group through the Head, Heart, Hands section in the PSG (p. 49). If running short on time, specifically highlight the **Head** section in this week’s study, inviting volunteers to share their responses to the question in this section.



HEAD: Many Christians get caught up in politics, and politicians on all sides often forget that every earthly kingdom will fail us in some way. But a better kingdom is coming one day, one ruled by Christ and enjoyed by more people than we can count. As we consider world events, let us never forget the King on His throne in heaven. Everything is going His way, and He loves us. Let our minds be fixed there first.

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



HEART: Just like our heads, our hearts can easily get caught up in the kingdoms of this world. But we have a better hope in Jesus that the kingdom we long for is coming. If we find ourselves oppressed and persecuted like Daniel, we can be comforted by the good news that our hardships are only temporary. Our hearts won’t hurt forever. Jesus is coming.

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



HANDS: Social media is a hotbed for fear-mongering and political drama.

No matter your political leanings, you can find something to thrill you and terrify you. As Christians, we should focus chiefly on bringing gospel clarity to people who are searching for hope in this present world. Through our testimony and our actions, we can help them find peace in Christ.

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

NEXT STEPS

Challenge the group to consider these actions as responses to this session.

- This week, when you encounter a situation that leads you to worry, remind yourself of the power and majesty of Jesus, the divine Son of Man.
- Read 2 Corinthians 10:3-5. Let these verses guide you as you replace your negative thoughts with the truth of Scripture. God has the power to transform your thought life.
- We tell people about the things that excite us. This week, share with someone about the nature and power of Jesus and His kingdom that is coming one day.

Invite volunteers to share prayer needs for this week. Encourage them to record these in the space on page 49 in their PSG so they can pray for others throughout the week.

PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES

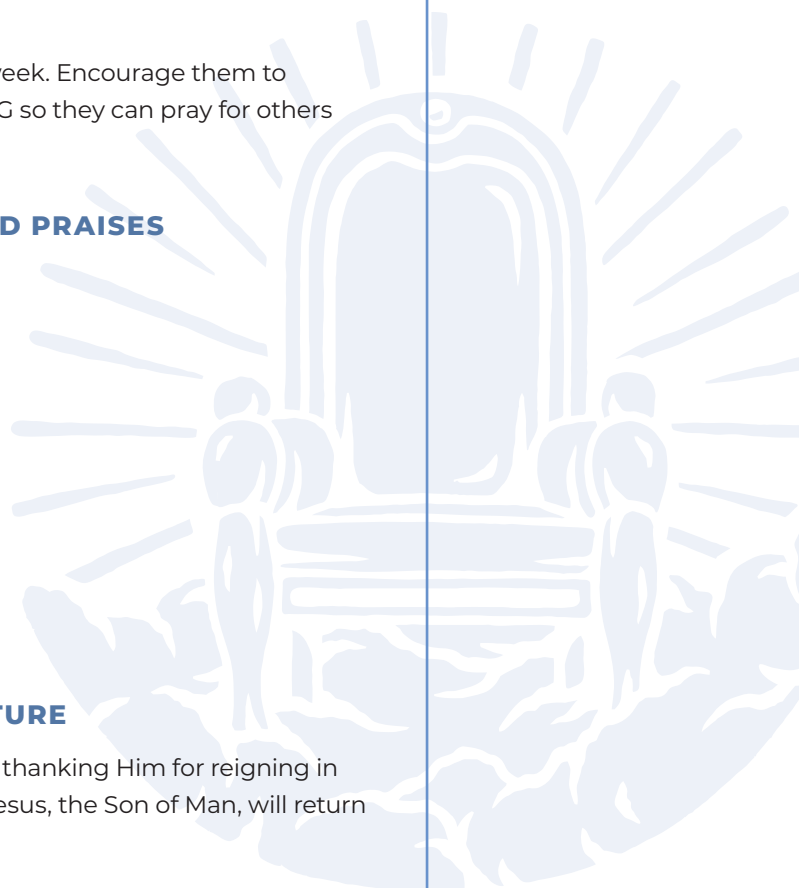
PRAYING SCRIPTURE

CLOSE: Pray through Psalm 93 with your group, thanking Him for reigning in holiness, strength, and power. Thank Him that Jesus, the Son of Man, will return one day to establish His kingdom forever.

References

1. Joyce G. Baldwin, *Daniel: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 23, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 155.

Notes



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.

As you examine Ezra 1:5-8; 3:1-7:

- Recognize that even through discipline, God desires to restore His people.
- Highlight how King Cyrus recognized God's power and gave Him the praise He deserved.



TIMELINE

King Nebuchadnezzar Takes
the First Exiles to Babylon,
Beginning the 70 Years of
Exile (2 Kings 24; Daniel 1)

King Evil-Merodach Pardons
King Jehoiachin of Judah in
Babylon (2 Kings 25)

King Cyrus Issues Decree
Allowing the Jews to Return
to Judah (Ezra 1)

Nebuchadnezzar Destroys
Jerusalem and the Temple
(2 Kings 25)

Babylon Is Conquered by
Medo-Persia (Daniel 5)

SESSION STUDY: The First
Group of Jews Returns,
Builds the Altar, and Lays the
Foundation for the Temple
(Ezra 1-3)

Daily Readings

☐ **Day 1:** Joel 1:1-3:21

☐ **Day 2:** 2 Chronicles 36:22-23

☐ **Day 3:** Ezra 1:1-11

☐ **Day 4:** Ezra 2:1-70

☐ **Day 5:** Ezra 3:1-13

☐ **Day 6:** Psalm 126



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

GOD WANTS TO RESTORE US BACK INTO RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM (EZRA 1:5-8).

Underline all the people or groups mentioned in this passage.

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.

Not long after creation, the sin of Adam changed everything and messed it all up with dire consequences for his sin. Yet God did not give up on humankind. Instead of starting all over, He initiated a plan of redemption—and God has been pursuing His people ever since. The Old Testament is filled with accounts of this redemptive work. God initiated covenants, instituted laws, provided systems, sent prophets, ordained rulers, and even moved hearts to go rebuild His house, all to pursue and provide for His people.

The author of Ezra clearly recognized God’s providential hand in the Jews’ return to Jerusalem (see Ezra 1:1-4). It often can be difficult to see such things in the moment, but with hindsight and, of course, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the writer saw it clearly that God moved massive mountains to bring His people home.

LEADER NOTE: The preceding verses of Ezra 1:1-4 provide context for God’s providential work in the Jews’ restoration. God had foretold their return to the land through the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 29:10-14). God had given Cyrus “all the kingdoms of the earth” and appointed him to rebuild the Lord’s temple (v. 2). God even “roused the spirit” of Cyrus to issue a decree that would allow God’s people to return to Judah as part of His temple restoration plan (v. 1). This massive turn of events must have been beyond their wildest dreams—unless they remembered God’s promises given long ago.

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

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.

From start to finish, the book of Ezra is a testimony of God's faithful work of restoration. God roused hearts, provided goods, returned articles, and more. God is always working, even when it seems all hope is lost.

This is a theme throughout the Old Testament. Just as the Lord worked to deliver His people from Egypt in His perfect timing, we can trust that He works in our lives in the same providential way. Just as He raised up the right ruler to send His people back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, we can wait on His faithful care to lead the movements of our lives. We may not know or understand His timing. We may not like or enjoy His means. But God's work is sure and steadfast because it flows from His good and faithful character.

LEADER NOTE: This passage holds many parallels with the exodus account. Both were deliverance events previously promised (see Gen. 15:13-16; Jer. 29:10-14). In His perfect timing, God initiated both by stirring the hearts of pagan kings toward action. Just as in Egypt, God's people in Babylon were released from captivity to enter the land God promised them so that they could worship Him. Here in Ezra, support for the journey and supplies for the temple were provided by the king and their neighbors. In Egypt, the neighboring Egyptians generously gave to the Israelites when asked, and these spoils were later used to build the tabernacle (Ex. 12:35-36; 25:1-8).

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).

Circle all the references to offerings to the Lord in this passage.

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.

After many months, God's people gathered to continue their process of settling in. No longer chained by the oppression of regimes, they were free to return to their homeland, resettle into ancestral rhythms, and rebuild their central place of worship. Ezra 3 records a major milestone in the history of their big move.

LEADER NOTE: "The seventh month" (3:1), Tishri in the Jewish calendar, was a significant one. Tishri, corresponding to our September/October, included celebrations for their new year, the Day of Atonement, and the Festival of Shelters (see Lev. 23:23-36). King Solomon dedicated the original temple at the Festival of Shelters (1 Kings 8:2,65). The timing seen here in Ezra 3 is not coincidental.

It is not an insignificant detail that they started with building the altar. It might have been a temptation to start building walls, ceilings, and corridors. But they started with the altar, "even though the foundation of the Lord's temple had not yet been laid" (3:6). The worship of God demanded sacrifice, and sacrifice required an altar. God's people could not resume worshiping the Lord as He had instituted long ago without an altar.

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

How easy it is to get sidetracked by what seems the most logical, practical, or economical. But we must follow in the footsteps of our spiritual forefathers and go with what is most worshipful. Through the final sacrifice of Christ, our worship as believers under the new covenant is no longer dependent on a physical altar, but we are still called to worship.

THEOLOGY CONNECTION

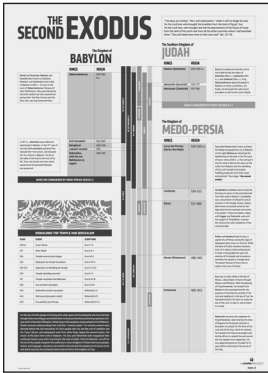
CHRIST AS SACRIFICE: There are several signs, symbols, and pointers in the Old Testament that foreshadowed Christ as being the sacrificial Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world. However, unlike the sacrificial system of the Old Testament, whose sacrifices were unable to take away sin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

We too are in the middle of a move—a spiritual journey out of bondage into our new life with Christ. However, we do not need to build an altar to worship God. Instead, we must rely on the sufficiency of our Savior's sacrifice and respond to this grace through obedience-filled worship (Rom. 12:1-2).

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

LEADER NOTE: Though believers in Christ are no longer bound by Old Testament rituals for the right and proper worship of God, we are still called to worship according to His Word. Here are a few highlights to inform our thoughts and practice, based on Romans 12:1. Our worship is to be: (1) intentional, (2) holy, (3) pleasing to God, (4) spiritual, not merely physical, and (5) involving our bodies. Old Testament sacrifices required the entire body of an animal; our worship requires our entire selves.

Notes



ARRIVAL

ENGAGE: As adults arrive, ask them if they have ever thought something was completely ruined—maybe a favorite shirt that got stained, a plant they were sure was dead, or a sports match they were convinced their team was going to lose—only to see it restored. Ask how it felt to see that thing come back to life again.

CONTEXT

SUMMARIZE: Recall **Pack Item 2: The Second Exodus** and point to the span of time covered by the books of Daniel and Ezra 1–6 to help your group make timeline connections as you provide the context for this session. Say: “The book of Daniel recounts God’s faithfulness to His exiles in Babylon and the beginning of the Persian Empire. The book of Ezra recounts God’s faithfulness in bringing His people back from exile and restoring them to their homeland. This restoration was not just about rebuilding the temple; it was about renewing their worship and devotion to God.”

TRANSITION: As we study the Scripture today, we will see how in Ezra 1:5-8, God stirred the hearts of His people to return and provided the resources needed for their restoration. In Ezra 3:1-7, we will see the people’s response—they immediately restored the altar and resumed sacrificial worship, even before rebuilding the temple. Their actions show that spiritual renewal begins with worship and obedience to God.

RECAP

LIST: Lead the group to share their key findings as they were preparing for the session. Ask: “What was encouraging to you? Was there anything confusing or missing you would like to clarify?”

TRANSITION: From here, based on the two Scripture passages for our activity, let’s chart out how God’s provision leads to our response.



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GROUP ACTIVITY

CHART: Direct your group to page 58 in their Personal Study Guide (PSG), where they will find a chart titled “God’s Provision and Our Response.” Recreate this chart on a board in your room so you can record the group’s responses.

God’s Provision and Our Response	
Read Ezra 1:5-8; 3:1-7. Record what God provided for the returning exiles and how they responded. Then apply this pattern to yourself.	
WHAT GOD PROVIDED	HOW THE PEOPLE RESPONDED
WHAT GOD PROVIDES FOR ME	HOW I RESPOND

DIRECT: Divide the group into two teams. Assign one team Ezra 1:5-8 and the other Ezra 3:1-7. Guide each team to read their passage and identify key ways God provided for His people’s restoration to the land (*stirring the people’s hearts [1:5]; providing resources through their neighbors [1:6]; King Cyrus ensuring the return of articles for the temple [1:7-8]*) or the people’s response (*their willingness to gather [3:1]; rebuilding the altar, offering sacrifices, and committing to worship despite opposition [3:3]*). After a few minutes, bring the teams together to discuss their findings. Encourage the group to fill out the chart in their PSG as you fill out the chart on the board.

DISCUSS: How does this pattern of God’s provision and human response apply to our own spiritual restoration through Jesus Christ?

ENGAGE: Invite groups of 3-4 to discuss and record personally what God has done in their own lives and how they can follow the example of Ezra and the Israelites in their response. After a few minutes, invite volunteers to share their experiences while you summarize them for the chart on the board.

SAY: God initiates restoration, but His people must respond in faith and obedience. In Ezra, this meant rebuilding the altar and offering sacrifices even before laying the temple's foundation. The temple had been the dwelling place of God, where His presence rested among His people. But even in their unhoused worship, the Lord was reconciling them with Himself.

DEBRIEF

(PSG p. 58) What do these passages reveal about God's desire for restoration?

How do you see this pattern in your own life: God providing and calling you to respond?

SUMMARIZE

The Jews who returned from exile began to restore their worship of the Lord with the prescribed sacrifices on the altar of the temple. But now, through Christ's perfect sacrifice, God's people have direct access to God. Christ did what no man could. Jesus presented the most perfect sacrifice once for all—Himself. Therefore, believers are not just visitors in His presence; we are His dwelling place. The Holy Spirit lives in us, shaping us, refining us, reconciling us, and making us more like Jesus. Today, our response to God's restoration includes faith in Christ's ultimate sacrifice and daily worship of Him through our lives.

HEAD, HEART, HANDS

Walk the group through the Head, Heart, Hands section in the PSG (p. 59). If running short on time, specifically highlight the **Hands** section in this week's study, inviting volunteers to share their responses to the question in this section.



HEAD: When things are hard, it's easy to start thinking God has forgotten us, or worse, abandoned us. This is especially true when we know we've messed up. But if we are in Christ by faith, then we are forever tethered to God's grace. We can know and trust and hold onto the fact that God is always working to reconcile us to Himself and make all things good and right and just as they should be, regardless of what we can see and reason on our own.

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



HEART: God's people seemed to be laser-focused on getting the "right" job done. Instead of giving in to overplanning and performative busy work, they committed themselves to radical obedience and a spiritual strategy over all else. This approach revealed their heart to draw near to God through the clear way He had laid out in His Word. God isn't ambiguous in what He desires. His people knew the requirements and followed them completely.

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



HANDS: Though we are no longer required to perform ritual sacrifices to appease God's wrath for sin, we are called to an active life of sacrifice. The Bible is filled with clear and universal callings on our lives, geared toward our holiness as image-bearers of God. By faith, we can live a life of continual sacrifice, fueled by the desire to worship the God who has rescued us from bondage to sin.

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

NEXT STEPS

Challenge the group to consider these actions as responses to this week's session.

- Reflect on an area in your life where you need restoration. Pray for God's provision and seek His guidance.
- Take an intentional step of obedience this week. Be proactive: write it down as a note on your phone and share your intentions with a godly friend for accountability. Respond to God's call for restoration.
- Encourage someone in their search for restoration. Just as God used leaders and the community in their return from exile, look for ways to support someone with biblical truth in their need for reconciliation and restoration.

Invite volunteers to share prayer needs for this week. Encourage them to record these in the space on page 59 in their PSG so they can pray for others throughout the week.

PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES

PRAYING SCRIPTURE

CLOSE: Pray through Psalm 126:1-3 with your group, praying for opportunities for your group to share with others about the greatness of His gospel for the salvation of every sinner who believes in Jesus.

Notes

THE PERSIAN EMPIRE

Adapted from an article by Kelvin Moore



The Persian Empire ranks among the great empires of the world with the Egyptian, Assyrian, and Babylonian Empires. The books of 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Esther, Ezekiel, and Daniel make reference to the Persian Empire. Most readers of the Old Testament recognize the names of Persian kings such as Darius, Artaxerxes, and especially Cyrus. But what do we know about the Persian Empire?

PERSIA'S RISE AND FALL

Originally, the ancient world knew Persia as “Fars” (also spelled “Pars”) or “Faristan,” a name derived from the chief province. Historians assume the Persians originated from central Asia around 1000 BC, about the time David solidified his reign over Israel. After the Elamite culture collapsed in 1050 BC, several groups entered the region. From these groups, the Persian Empire evolved. In the Old Testament world, Persia referred to a country laying to the east of modern-day Iraq in the region of Iran. At the height of power, Persia included territories currently found in Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Syria, Türkiye, Russia, Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

Generally speaking, the Persian Empire began with the victories of Cyrus II over Babylon in 539 BC and ended with defeats to the Greeks under Alexander the Great (356–323 BC). The Babylonian Empire began to decay after the death of Nebuchadnezzar (605–562 BC). Cyrus recognized Babylon's weaknesses and instability and decided to attack. Daniel's account of the handwriting on the wall (Dan. 5) tells of the night Cyrus's army entered Babylon and killed King Belshazzar. Cyrus's conquering of Babylon in 539 BC raised Persia to the position of a world empire. Persia, now powerful and expansive, encompassed the entire Near East.

Ultimately, the Greek army under Alexander the Great conquered the entire Persian Empire in 332 BC, ushering in the Hellenistic age.

PERSIA'S RULERS AND RELIGIONS

While kings were not regarded as gods, the Persians viewed their kings as earthly lieutenants of the deities of the empire. Many of these kings possessed notable administrative skills. Persian kings developed the most organized empire the world had ever witnessed. Cyrus II (559–530 BC) divided the empire into twenty large districts known as “satrapies,” each ruled by a satrap. Kings normally appointed satraps, who were directly responsible to the king himself, from Persian or Median nobles. Satraps, then, ordinarily appointed native officers: Jews in Judah, Samaritans in Samaria, and Arabs in the South. Daniel 6:1-3 lists Daniel as a native officer under Darius and calls him an “administrator.” Additionally, Persian kings divided satrapies into provinces, each having their own administrative organizations and small military garrisons. The Persians committed themselves to rule by law. But the kings did not impose an imperial law. Instead, the Persian kings gave support and authority to local law and its enforcement.

Persian religion remains mystifying and passionately debated. Early Persians revered gods of nature, fertility, and the heavens. Some believe that the religious leader Zoroaster lived in the 7th century BC and influenced Persian belief. Zoroaster proclaimed a religion based on the principle “do good, hate evil.” For Zoroaster, the good god Ahura-Mazda, represented by fire and water, stood opposite to a dark power of evil. Other historians deny the widespread influence of Zoroaster.

Many of these kings possessed notable administrative skills.
Persian kings developed the most organized empire
the world had ever witnessed.

PERSIA AND THE BIBLE

The Old Testament records numerous points of interaction between the Persians and Hebrews. Isaiah 44:28–45:1 records an early reference to King Cyrus II, the Great. In contrast to the Assyrians and Babylonians, Cyrus adopted a much more lenient policy toward his captives. Cyrus allowed exiled Jews to return to their native land and rebuild their homes. Cyrus encouraged the returning Jews to rebuild their place of worship:

The LORD, the God of the heavens, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and has appointed me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of his people among you, may his God be with him, and may he go to Jerusalem in Judah and build the house of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem. (Ezra 1:2-3)

Additionally, Cyrus generously authorized the Hebrews to draw funds from the imperial treasury to finance temple reconstruction (6:8). Cyrus's humanitarian policy gained him the good will of almost all the ancient world—so much so, in fact, that Isaiah hailed Cyrus as God's "shepherd" (Isa. 44:28). According to Isaiah, Cyrus was God's chosen instrument to deliver the Hebrews (45:1).

After Cyrus's decree, the returning Jews managed to lay the temple's foundation. But due to opposition, work ceased for the next fifteen to sixteen years. Encouraged by the minor prophets Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5), the Jews again began work on the temple during the reign of Darius I ("the Great," 522–486 BC). Unaware of Cyrus's edict, the governor of Jerusalem's province west of the Euphrates attempted to delay the reconstruction in 520 BC. He sent a letter to the satrap requesting

an inquiry as to Jewish authorization to rebuild the temple. The ensuing search found nothing in the archives of Babylon. Further examination in Ecbatana, Cyrus's residence during his first year, uncovered the decree. Ezra 6 records that Darius I verified Cyrus's declaration and allowed work on the temple to resume. Ezra dated the completion of the temple "on the third day of the month of Adar in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius" (Ezra 6:15).

The book of Esther records the crisis and subsequent miraculous deliverance that took place during the reign of King Ahasuerus (Esth. 1:1-2). After dismissing his queen, Vashti, a search throughout the kingdom led King Ahasuerus to marry Esther, who was a Jew. Most likely, Ahasuerus, Hebrew for Xerxes, referred to Xerxes I (486–465 BC).

Ezekiel named Persia among the armies of Tyre (Ezek. 27:10) and as an ally of God in the invasion against Israel (38:5). The prophet Daniel recorded numerous references to Persia (Dan. 8:20; 10:1; 11:2). Elsewhere, Nehemiah's efforts to rebuild Jerusalem's wall date to the reign of Persian King Artaxerxes I Longimanus (about 465–424 BC). Nehemiah requested permission to return to Jerusalem to rebuild its wall "in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes" (Neh. 2:1). Artaxerxes I Longimanus's twentieth year dates 445 BC. History offers no information about relations between Persian kings and Jews after the time of Nehemiah.

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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.

As you examine Ezra 6:6-12,16-22:

- Reflect on the reality that though enemies of God tried to stop the rebuilding of the temple, God had a plan in place.
- Recognize that joy comes with worship as we remember God's faithfulness in the past, present, and into the future.



TIMELINE

King Cyrus of Persia
Issues Decree Allowing
the Jews to Return to
Judah (Ezra 1)

The Jews Face Opposition
and Pause Rebuilding the
Temple (Ezra 4)

SESSION STUDY:
The Temple Is Completed
and Dedicated (Ezra 6)

The First Group of Jews Returns,
Builds the Altar, and Lays the
Foundation for the Temple (Ezra 1-3)

Haggai and Zechariah
Encourage the Building
to Resume (Ezra 5)

Ezra the Priest Returns to
Judah and Instructs the People
in the Law (Ezra 7-10)

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 |



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

GOD IS ABLE TO USE ANY MEANS TO RESTORE WORSHIP OF HIM (EZRA 6:6-12).

Circle the phrases in which King Darius references God as part of His decree.

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.

Soon after the temple's foundation was set and dedicated, opposition to the work emerged. Enemies sought to sabotage the efforts of God's people: first by attempting to infiltrate their work and then by making them afraid to build; they also bribed officials to frustrate the work (4:1-5). Unfortunately, the enemies' crusade to crush the construction efforts succeeded.

The work on the house of God stopped "until the second year of the reign of King Darius of Persia" (4:24). For over a decade, the job site sat in silence. Day after day, year after year, God's people passed by the unfulfilled slab of rock dedicated for the structure central to their life and worship. Perhaps the people felt defeated, at first, but then that seemed to give way to disinterest as they turned their focus to their own houses (Hag. 1:2-4).

LEADER NOTE: A look at the rebuke Haggai brought against the people provides perspective on their hearts during this period (see Hag. 1:2-11). Certainly, after the political and psychological beating they took from the opposition, they were war-torn and weary. But they had given in to more than just discouragement; they had become selfish and complacent. To rouse them out of this mind-set,

the Lord asked through Haggai, “Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?” (v. 4).

When has opposition discouraged you from obeying the Lord?

In His perfect timing, God raised up the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to re-declare God’s plan and stir up God’s people to restart the rebuilding efforts. But this also rekindled the difficulties—a letter from the regional governor was sent to the king of Persia asking if this rebuild was allowed (Ezra 5:1-17).

The faithful God of Israel led King Darius of Persia to respond to the letter with a clear decree in the Jews’ favor. First, Cyrus’s original decree was found (6:1-5). Then in keeping with Medo-Persian law, in which a decree of the king is irrevocable (Dan. 6:8), and in deference to “the God of the heavens,” Darius supported, protected, and provided for the construction of God’s house (Ezra 6:6-12). The Lord used both Cyrus and Darius to accomplish His will.

LEADER NOTE: The book of Zechariah includes the same time reference as Ezra 4:24: “in the second year of Darius” (Zech. 1:1). Through Zechariah, God called His people to covenant faithfulness: “Do not be like your ancestors” (v. 4). The Jewish remnant’s lack of resolve to rebuild the temple was a deep disobedience. But God didn’t just rebuke them; He also sent a message of hope: The temple would be completed “not by strength or by might, but by my Spirit” (4:6).

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

Notes

THEOLOGY CONNECTION

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

WHEN WE CELEBRATE GOD'S PAST FAITHFULNESS, JOYFUL WORSHIP ENSUES (EZRA 6:16-22).

Underline the ways the Israelites celebrated the dedication of the temple “with joy.”

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

LEADER NOTE: The offerings recorded in Ezra 6 are a fraction of the number presented by Solomon at the dedication of God's first temple, a sober reminder of how far God's people had fallen (1 Kings 8:63). Yet Psalm 51:17 provides a good reminder: “The sacrifice pleasing to God is a broken spirit. You will not despise a broken and humbled heart, God.” The remnant's offerings resembles that of the widow's mite (Mark 12:41-44). They may not have been much compared to other offerings, but they did demonstrate the people's devotion to the Lord.

The people celebrated, offered, appointed, observed, and more “in order to worship the LORD” (Ezra 6:21). And all of this unfolded in the context of community and “with joy, because the LORD had made them joyful” (v. 22). Worship activates action, fosters fellowship, and rouses rejoicing. The context of the majority of God's commands surrounding worship is corporate, expecting a body of believers with a common goal of God's glory.

Though we no longer slay lambs and build temples, we can worship with the same fervor and joy, together as the church. Worship isn't passive or solitary. While lyrics and mountaintops may stir our souls, the call to worship leads God's people to active, corporate rejoicing in who God is and all He has done.

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

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.

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

Within a month of the temple's completion and dedication, the time arrived for Passover—a long-standing celebration of God's deliverance of His people from slavery in Egypt—and then the Festival of Unleavened Bread. Both were instituted by the Lord at the beginning of the exodus “because on this very day I brought your military divisions out of the land of Egypt. You must observe this day throughout your generations as a permanent statute” (Ex. 12:17).

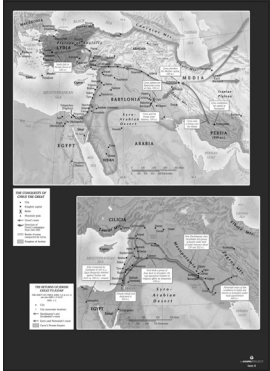
LEADER NOTE: The first Passover occurred on the evening of the final Egyptian plague (Ex. 12:1-28). That night, God passed through the land of Egypt and struck down the firstborn of every household—except those with a lamb's blood on their doorposts, as God had instructed. God then commanded His people to observe the Passover feast each year to celebrate God's deliverance (Ex. 12:14-20; Deut. 16:1-8). The destruction of the temple prevented this celebration, making the Passover in Ezra 6 a restorative event.

Recalling God's faithfulness is vital to our faith and worship. Day by day, year by year, generation after generation, we are called to remember who God is and all He has done. He is good. He does good. He is worthy of our praise. Though the remnant Jews in Jerusalem faced an uncertain future under Persian rule, they chose to worship God for His past deeds and what He was presently doing. When the future seems cloudy, we can look to our past and present to see how God has unfailingly provided all we needed, precisely when we needed it.

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

Notes

Notes



ARRIVAL

INTERACT: As adults arrive, invite them to share a time when they were given something in a very unexpected way. Encourage them to consider how they responded—was it with joy, gratitude, or thankfulness? Perhaps even relief? This will set the stage for discussing how God’s provision leads to worship and joy.

CONTEXT

SAY: Display **Pack Item 9: Persia and the Return Map** to visualize the returns of the Jews to Jerusalem after Cyrus’s decree. Say: “The book of Ezra recounts the return of Jewish exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem and the restoration of the temple and religious life in Israel. It covers a period of about eighty years and is divided into two parts. The first part, chapters 1–6, focuses on the first two waves of exiles (led by Sheshbazzar and then Zerubbabel). These people responded to Cyrus’s decree and returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the Lord’s temple. The restoration process faced opposition, but God sovereignly worked through pagan rulers to see His temple brought to completion. Ezra 6 records how God turned resistance into provision, demonstrating His faithfulness. With the temple rebuilt, the people responded with worship and celebration, recalling God’s covenant promises.”

RECAP

REFLECT: Ask group members to share one truth they learned through their personal preparation during the past week.

TRANSITION: Today in our study of Ezra 6, we’ll see how God ensured the temple’s full restoration despite opposition. As we interact with Scripture, we’ll consider for ourselves how God’s faithfulness in our own lives should lead us to worship Him with joyful celebration.



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

GROUP ACTIVITY

CHART: Direct your group to page 66 in their Personal Study Guide (PSG), where they will find a chart titled “God’s Continuing Faithfulness.” Recreate this chart on a board in your room so you can record the group’s responses.

Notes

God’s Continuing Faithfulness	
Read the following Scriptures and write down how God displayed His faithfulness. Then record how God has shown you His faithfulness.	
Exodus 14:13-31	Daniel 2:1-23
Acts 2:36-47	Acts 5:25-42
Ezra 6:6-12,16-22	
TODAY	

ANALYZE: Form four smaller groups and assign each group one of the following Scripture passages: Exodus 14:13-31; Daniel 2:1-23; Acts 2:36-47; Acts 5:25-42. In their smaller groups, encourage teams to read their passage and write down in their PSG the ways God showed His faithfulness. After a few minutes, invite a volunteer from each group to summarize their Scripture, identify how God provided for His people, and discuss how the people responded. Write down on the chart their responses. Ask: “What methods did God use to show His faithfulness?” (examples: the Red Sea [Ex. 14:13-31]; supplied His wisdom through prayer [Dan. 2:1-23]; the Holy Spirit and unity of the early church [Acts 2:36-47]; boldness from God and the reasoning of an opponent [Acts 5:25-42])

READ: Ask two volunteers to read Ezra 6:6-12 and 16-22.

IDENTIFY: As a whole group, identify ways God showed His faithfulness to the Israelites in Ezra 6 and how the people responded to God’s faithfulness. Record these on the board. Then lead the group to consider God’s faithfulness in their

own lives. Discuss: “How does recalling God’s faithfulness fuel our worship and joy? How might our worship and joy for God’s faithfulness appear to those who are not yet part of the family of faith?”

DEBRIEF

How did God use unexpected means to restore worship in the passages we examined?

(PSG p. 66) What part do we play in the restoration of God’s worship in the world today?

SUMMARIZE

God’s faithfulness is not confined to the past; it remains evident today. Just as He orchestrated the temple’s restoration, He continues to work in our lives, leading us into joyful worship. When we recognize His faithfulness, our natural response should be celebration and devotion.

HEAD, HEART, HANDS

Walk the group through the Head, Heart, Hands section in the PSG (p. 67). If running short on time, specifically highlight the **Head** section in this week’s study, inviting volunteers to share their responses to the question in this section.



HEAD: In the hustle and bustle of daily life, it’s easy to forget why we exist. God created us for His glory. He has left us on this earth for His glory. He will call us into eternity for His glory. We must settle this in our minds to live out our purpose rightly. Any other purpose falls short of why we exist. We exist for God’s glory.

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



HEART: Worship can sometimes feel like an abstract concept or archaic relic of the past. Yet the reality is our hearts are made to worship. With every moment shared, effort given, dollar spent, talent used, word spoken, and deed done, we worship. The question we must seek to answer is this: Who or what is the object of my worship? If the answer is anything other than God, we have work to do when it comes to our worship.

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



HANDS: As we seek to turn our hearts toward Christ more each day because He is always faithful in our salvation, we can be encouraged that we are not left to our own devices. God has given us many gifts of grace to help our pursuit of His worship as we combat the idols vying for our affections. Chiefly, our faithful Father has provided His truth-filled Word, His Spirit—our Helper, Counselor, and Guide—and His people to live, learn, suffer,

and worship alongside. These provisions have been gifted lavishly. But we must intentionally employ them to enjoy their benefits if we seek to worship God better in our lives.

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

NEXT STEPS

Challenge the group to consider these actions as responses to this week's session.

- This week, journal how God has been faithful to you. Take time to recall His love for you and write how that leads you to worship.
- Plan a time of thanksgiving, either personally or with others, to praise God for His faithfulness.
- Consider how you can encourage someone else by sharing how God has provided for you. Make an appointment to meet for coffee and/or a chat with that person this week.

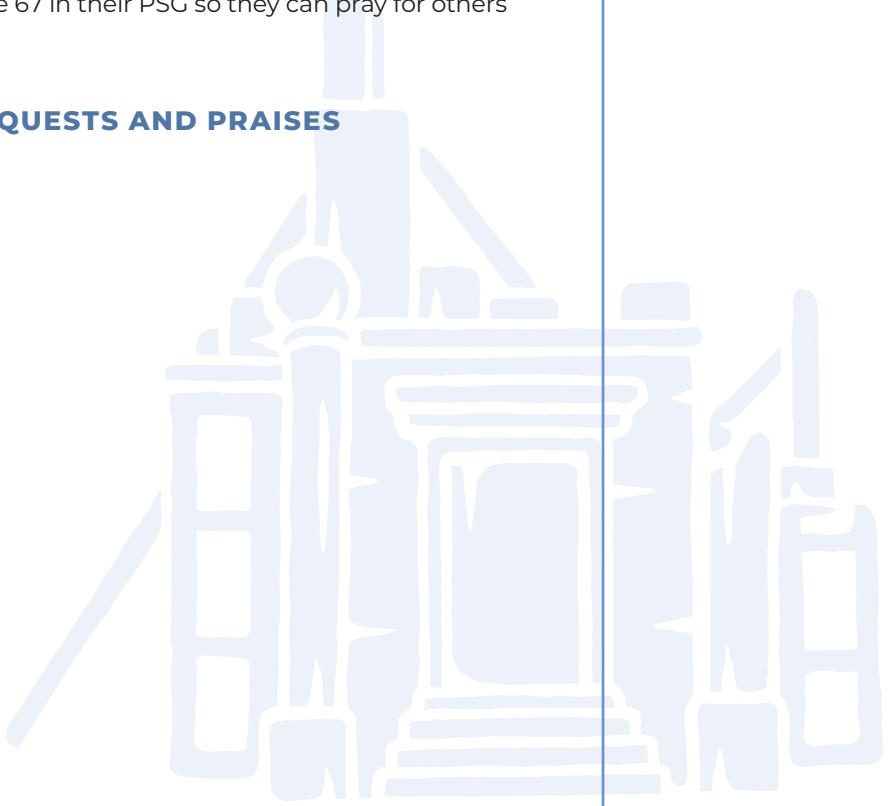
Invite volunteers to share prayer needs for this week. Encourage them to record these in the space on page 67 in their PSG so they can pray for others throughout the week.

PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES

PRAYING SCRIPTURE

CLOSE: Pray through Psalm 20:6-9 with your group, thanking the Lord for His gifts, provision, and salvation to those who call on His name.

Notes



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.

As you examine Zechariah 9:9-17:

- Notice how Zechariah described the coming king who would restore God’s people and kingdom.
- Take comfort in the truth that the Lord will save His people because they are precious to Him.



TIMELINE

The First Group of Jews Returns, Builds the Altar, and Lays the Foundation for the Temple (Ezra 1–3)

Haggai and Zechariah Encourage the Building to Resume (Ezra 5)

The Temple Is Completed and Dedicated (Ezra 6)

The Jews Face Opposition and Pause Rebuilding the Temple (Ezra 4)

SESSION STUDY: Zechariah
Prophesies of the Coming
Messiah (Zechariah 9)

Ezra the Priest Returns to Judah and Instructs the People in the Law (Ezra 7–10)

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 |



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

THE PROMISED MESSIANIC KING WILL BE RIGHTEOUS AND HUMBLE, RIDING ON A DONKEY (ZECHARIAH 9:9-13).

Circle everything attributed to the promised King in this passage.

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.

LEADER NOTE: The first half of the book of Zechariah brims with commands and promises God gave His people in Jerusalem through Zechariah's night visions—they were to resume rebuilding the temple. Chapters 9–14, however, shift focus. Though these oracles addressed Zechariah's original audience, God also intended them for a broader group, unveiling His plans for a distant future. This promise sparked hope and joy for the Jews and ultimately for all of God's people.

Verse 9 reveals much about the promised Messiah-King. First, He emerges as “your” King. He will belong to God's people; He won't be a foreign king like those who had subdued them for nearly a century. This King most certainly would be of David's line, a true and proper King of the Jews.

Second, this promised King is “coming.” There is a divine plan in place surrounding Him, which leads to the third detail to see—He is coming “to you.” God's people could expect this promised One to come to them. Next, the text lists various traits of this Messiah: righteous, victorious, humble. Most rulers barely embody one of those characteristics, never all three.

Lastly, verse 9 tells us the King will ride on a donkey's foal. With New Testament insight, we see this fulfilled in Matthew 21, when Jesus triumphantly rode into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey a week before His death and resurrection—a day we celebrate each year as Palm Sunday.

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

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

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.

Zechariah also declared the King's victory. War will cease. He will proclaim peace to the nations. He will rule from sea to sea. His kingdom will extend to the ends of the earth.

Though much of what Zechariah foretold has been accomplished, God's restoration plan continues. From where we stand, we see more clearly than the people of Zechariah's time, yet the Messiah's kingdom awaits completion. So until that day when Jesus comes again, with Christ we pray: "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10).

LEADER NOTE: In addition to Zechariah's prophecy that Jesus, the messianic King, would ride on a donkey (Zech. 9:9), he also prophesied the thirty pieces of silver that Judas would throw into the temple (Zech. 11:12-13; cf. Matt. 27:3-10), the scattering of the disciples at Jesus's arrest (Zech. 13:7; cf. Matt. 26:31,56), the piercing of Jesus on the cross (Zech. 12:10; cf. John 19:34-37), and the rule of Jesus from Jerusalem upon His second coming (Zech. 14:3-11; cf. Rev. 21-22).

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



Notes

GOD WILL DEFEND AND SAVE HIS BELOVED PEOPLE THROUGH HIS MESSIAH-KING (ZECHARIAH 9:14-17).

Circle every action of the Lord in the text.

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.

LEADER NOTE: The exodus marked a pivotal moment for God's people. Through it God displayed His power in magnificent, unprecedented ways, one of those being the Lord went ahead of them to lead them in a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night (Ex. 13:21-22). The pillar was a tangible sign of His majesty, a constant assurance of His presence, and a vivid testament to His special care for His people. When Zechariah prophesied that God would appear over His people like a storm, this vivid imagery certainly recalled the faithful provision and powerful guidance God previously granted His people in the exodus.

This passage reveals two vivid portraits of God's provision. First, God emerges as the divine, majestic commander. Arrows fly, trumpets sound, storms surge—this is frenetic battle language. Zechariah paints the sovereign Lord of Armies as defending and saving His people. This provision descends from above, as He “will appear over them” (Zech. 9:14). The fire of His glorious presence guides and guards His people—echoing His guidance and provision in the exodus (Ex. 13:21-22).

As a result, God's people will conquer, celebrate, and flourish (Zech. 9:15,17). Yet they will not sit on the sidelines; God will lead them to action—they will “conquer with slingstones.” Just as David toppled Goliath the giant with humble stones and faith in God (1 Sam. 17:49-50), they too will claim victory and rejoice as they trust in their heavenly King.

What victories has God provided that you can celebrate today?

God stands not only as the strong and stately Lord of Armies but also as the Savior of His flock. As Jesus later declared, He is the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep (John 10:11). This second portrait of provision, that of Savior, pulses with deep tenderness. The Lord cherishes His sheep “like jewels in a crown,” treasuring them as His prized possession (Zech. 9:16). He nourishes and cares for them, and they grow lovely and beautiful.

What a striking contrast of provision! The Lord’s glorious salvation spans the powerful deliverance of troops in battle and the nurturing care of treasured souls. The Lord Jesus came to save His people. The Good Shepherd rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, yet within a week, He was crucified on a cross. The war His people expected never erupted. Instead, King Jesus triumphed in a greater battle, saving His people from sin and death. Though His work on the cross stands complete, the Good Shepherd still seeks and saves the lost, desiring all to come to repentance until He returns for His treasured people (Luke 19:10; 2 Pet. 3:9).

LEADER NOTE: Interpreting biblical prophecy can be challenging. Old Testament prophets primarily spoke to their original audiences, and many of their prophecies found fulfillment long ago. Yet some passages carry a double horizon: an immediate message for God’s people then and a second foreshadow that hadn’t happened. Some second-horizon prophecies found full realization in Christ during His time on earth, while others still hold yet-to-be-realized messages for us today as we await the final Day of the Lord to arrive.

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

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.

Notes

ARRIVAL

ENGAGE: As adults arrive, invite volunteers to share about a time they were given something they needed even if it was not what they wanted.

TRANSITION: Many times in life, what we long for is not ultimately what we need. The people of Israel understood this all too well. God, in His great mercy, had greater plans than simply giving His people what they desired. Instead, He gave them what they really needed: a messianic King who would restore and save His people, not just from political division or war but from the greatest problem in the world—sin.

CONTEXT

SAY: Zechariah prophesied to the post-exilic Jewish community in Jerusalem around 520–518 BC, encouraging them to finish rebuilding the temple after their return from Babylonian exile (Ezra 5:1-2). Historically, this period was marked by political instability and opposition from surrounding nations, making the temple reconstruction difficult. But Zechariah emphasized God's sovereignty, the coming of the Messiah, and the ultimate restoration of Israel through his visions. His prophecies foreshadow Christ as the true King and High Priest (Zech. 9:9; 12:10), pointing to His first and second comings.

TRANSITION: Pass out copies of **Pack Item 10: Kings of the Exile** and discuss the significance and impact of the foreign kings the Jews had experienced so far. Say: “Zechariah 9 paints a vivid picture of the promised King—One who is both humble and victorious. This prophecy, fulfilled in Jesus’s triumphal entry (Matt. 21:1-10), contrasted earthly kings who came into power through warfare. The people of Israel longed for a political deliverer, yet Zechariah pointed to a greater reality—the Messiah’s kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36). Through His rule, God would bring salvation, restoration, and ultimate peace.”

RECAP

ENGAGE: Ask your group what stood out to them in their personal preparation this week. Clarify any questions they might have about Zechariah’s prophecy.

TRANSITION: In Zechariah 9, God divinely promised a coming King who would bring ultimate salvation. As we study, consider how God’s promises point to the greater hope of the Messiah’s reign.

KINGS OF THE EXILE		
DATE	SIGNIFICANCE	PROPHETIC AND BIBLICAL
586 BC	The first major exile of the Jews from Jerusalem to Babylon.	Jeremiah 27:1-22; 29:1-14; 39:1-21; 52:1-30
539 BC	The second major exile of the Jews from Babylon to Persia.	Darius the Great; 2 Kings 24:1-20; 25:1-21; 26:1-20
520 BC	The third major exile of the Jews from Persia to Jerusalem.	Zechariah 1:1-14; 2:1-17; 3:1-7; 4:1-14; 5:1-4; 6:1-15; 7:1-14; 8:1-23; 9:1-11; 10:1-6; 11:1-17; 12:1-14; 13:1-6; 14:1-21
518 BC	The fourth major exile of the Jews from Jerusalem to Persia.	Zechariah 1:1-14; 2:1-17; 3:1-7; 4:1-14; 5:1-4; 6:1-15; 7:1-14; 8:1-23; 9:1-11; 10:1-6; 11:1-17; 12:1-14; 13:1-6; 14:1-21
515 BC	The fifth major exile of the Jews from Persia to Jerusalem.	Zechariah 1:1-14; 2:1-17; 3:1-7; 4:1-14; 5:1-4; 6:1-15; 7:1-14; 8:1-23; 9:1-11; 10:1-6; 11:1-17; 12:1-14; 13:1-6; 14:1-21
500 BC	The sixth major exile of the Jews from Jerusalem to Persia.	Zechariah 1:1-14; 2:1-17; 3:1-7; 4:1-14; 5:1-4; 6:1-15; 7:1-14; 8:1-23; 9:1-11; 10:1-6; 11:1-17; 12:1-14; 13:1-6; 14:1-21
485 BC	The seventh major exile of the Jews from Persia to Jerusalem.	Zechariah 1:1-14; 2:1-17; 3:1-7; 4:1-14; 5:1-4; 6:1-15; 7:1-14; 8:1-23; 9:1-11; 10:1-6; 11:1-17; 12:1-14; 13:1-6; 14:1-21
475 BC	The eighth major exile of the Jews from Jerusalem to Persia.	Zechariah 1:1-14; 2:1-17; 3:1-7; 4:1-14; 5:1-4; 6:1-15; 7:1-14; 8:1-23; 9:1-11; 10:1-6; 11:1-17; 12:1-14; 13:1-6; 14:1-21
455 BC	The ninth major exile of the Jews from Persia to Jerusalem.	Zechariah 1:1-14; 2:1-17; 3:1-7; 4:1-14; 5:1-4; 6:1-15; 7:1-14; 8:1-23; 9:1-11; 10:1-6; 11:1-17; 12:1-14; 13:1-6; 14:1-21
445 BC	The tenth major exile of the Jews from Jerusalem to Persia.	Zechariah 1:1-14; 2:1-17; 3:1-7; 4:1-14; 5:1-4; 6:1-15; 7:1-14; 8:1-23; 9:1-11; 10:1-6; 11:1-17; 12:1-14; 13:1-6; 14:1-21



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

GROUP ACTIVITY

BLOCKS: Direct your group to page 74 in their Personal Study Guide (PSG), where they will find four blocks for the activity “Expectations vs. Reality.” Recreate this activity on a board in your room so you can record the group’s responses.

Expectations vs. Reality	
Read the Scriptures below. In the space provided, write how the reality of the kingdom of God far exceeds our expectations.	
ZECHARIAH 9:9-10 EXPECTED: A Conquering King REALITY:	JOHN 18:33-37 EXPECTED: Political Dominance REALITY:
HEBREWS 9:11-14 EXPECTED: Temporary Deliverance REALITY:	PHILIPPIANS 2:5-8 EXPECTED: Strength Through Force REALITY:

READ: Invite four volunteers to read the Scripture passages listed in the activity: Zechariah 9:9-10; John 18:33-37; Hebrews 9:11-14; and Philippians 2:5-8.

COMPARE: Form four smaller groups and assign each group one of the passages. Within the groups, guide adults to compare the expectation the people might have had regarding God’s plan for their salvation with the reality of what kind of King Jesus truly is. After a few minutes, reconvene and ask a volunteer from each group to share their ideas. Record these in the blocks on the board so they can also write them down in their PSG.

SAY: During Zechariah’s time, the Jews had been granted permission to return to their land, but they were still under the control of King Darius. It may have seemed to them that the only way God would fulfill His covenant with David to keep a king on the throne would be through an uprising or battle.

Notes

Notes

ASK: “What kind of king did Zechariah describe instead?” (*a humble king, coming in peace*) “When Jesus appeared hundreds of years later, the Jews were under Roman rule. They wanted Him to set up God’s kingdom on earth at that time, but what did Jesus say to Pilate?” (*His kingdom is not of this world*) “As we read last week, the Jews reinstated sacrifices in Jerusalem thanks to Zechariah’s encouragement for them to complete the temple. They expected a temporary deliverance, which would need to be repeated year after year on the Day of Atonement. When Jesus died on the cross and rose again, what did He accomplish for all those who trust in Him for salvation?” (*one sacrifice for all time to cleanse us from sin*) “When Jesus came to earth the first time, many people rejected Him as the Messiah because they expected a king who would come to power through force. In what manner did Jesus come the first time?” (*He humbled Himself, even to death on the cross*)

DEBRIEF

How does recognizing Jesus as the humble, righteous King shape our understanding of His rule in our lives today?

How might we expect Jesus to fit our own desires rather than submitting to His reign?

SUMMARIZE

Pass out copies of **Pack Item 11: Prophets of the Exile and Return** and review a few of the messages the Jews had received. Say: “Sometimes we expect the Lord to give us what we desire in our timeframe or by the means that we want. Zechariah’s prophecy reminds us that God’s ways are higher than ours and are always greater than what we could have imagined. Jesus, the humble King, brought peace not through military conquest but through His sacrificial death and resurrection. As a result, His salvation is not just for the people of Israel but given to all who call upon His name. His kingdom continues to grow as people repent and submit to His reign.”

HEAD, HEART, HANDS

Walk the group through the Head, Heart, Hands section in the PSG (p. 75). If running short on time, specifically highlight the **Heart** section in this week’s study, inviting volunteers to share their responses to the question in this section.



HEAD: In a world mostly removed from monarchical rule, especially as compared to the experience in the ancient world, it can be hard to grasp the ultimate rule of kings. But one thing is true of all sovereign rulers: by nature, the kingdom demands submission of all under its protection. Zechariah proclaimed a promise that has been fulfilled. The promised King has come. We are no longer waiting, and thus, we are under the King’s rule. We now have a choice of how we will live our lives: in complete obedience or in rebellion.

PROPHET	YEAR (BCE)	PRIMARY MESSAGE	POINTS TO REMEMBER
JEREMIAH	605-580	Because of their sin, God would send the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem and take the people into exile for 70 years.	Get ready to go into exile. Trust in God, not in human strength. Do not be deceived by false prophets.
ISAIAH	740-700	Because of their sin, God would send the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem and take the people into exile for 70 years.	Trust in God, not in human strength. Do not be deceived by false prophets.
JEKONIAH	604-598	Because of their sin, God would send the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem and take the people into exile for 70 years.	Trust in God, not in human strength. Do not be deceived by false prophets.
ZECHARIAH	780-740	Because of their sin, God would send the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem and take the people into exile for 70 years.	Trust in God, not in human strength. Do not be deceived by false prophets.
ISAIAH	740-700	Because of their sin, God would send the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem and take the people into exile for 70 years.	Trust in God, not in human strength. Do not be deceived by false prophets.
JEKONIAH	604-598	Because of their sin, God would send the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem and take the people into exile for 70 years.	Trust in God, not in human strength. Do not be deceived by false prophets.
ZECHARIAH	780-740	Because of their sin, God would send the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem and take the people into exile for 70 years.	Trust in God, not in human strength. Do not be deceived by false prophets.

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



HEART: Jesus powerfully delivers and faithfully provides. He has fought for His people through both grand battle campaigns involving nations and the search and rescue plans for one soul. He knows and cherishes the bride of Christ, the church, as a whole while tending to each of us personally.

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



HANDS: Though the King has come, time remains for those who haven't joined the kingdom to hear and believe the gospel. That window of opportunity will close one day. We don't know if that will be today, tomorrow, or in a thousand years. But when it does, only those who cling to the gospel will dwell with Christ forever.

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

NEXT STEPS

Challenge the group to consider these actions as responses to this session.

- Take some time to journal and reflect this week on what it means to see Jesus as King based on Psalm 2.
- Ask God to help you submit to Christ as King in every area of life.
- Share with someone in your life how Jesus is the true King who brings peace and salvation.

Invite volunteers to share prayer needs for this week. Encourage them to record these in the space on page 75 in their PSG so they can pray for others throughout the week.

PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES

PRAYING SCRIPTURE

CLOSE: Pray through Psalm 2:10-12 with your group. Pray for those with whom your group are trying to share the gospel that they would be wise and humble to hear and believe the good news and be happy in Jesus.

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.

As you examine Esther 3:7-9,13; 8:5,11-13,17:

- Recognize that though it may seem God is not present or working, He always is.
- Rejoice that God keeps His promises and covenants, preserving His people.



TIMELINE

The First Group of Jews
Returns and Rebuilds the
Temple (Ezra 1–6)

SESSION STUDY:
Esther and Mordecai Rescue God's
People from Destruction (Esther 3–10)

Nehemiah Returns and
Rebuilds the Wall Around
Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1–6)

Esther Is Made Queen of
Persia (Esther 1–2)

Ezra the Priest Returns to Judah and
Instructs the People in the Law (Ezra 7–10)

Daily Readings

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 1: Esther 1–2 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 4: Esther 6–7 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 2: Esther 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 5: Esther 8–10 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 3: Esther 4–5 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 6: Psalm 71 |



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

EVEN AT THE BRINK OF SEEMING DESTRUCTION, GOD IS WORKING AMONG HIS PEOPLE (ESTHER 3:7-9,13).

Underline the orders given for the destruction of the Jews.

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.

LEADER NOTE: King Ahasuerus of Persia, also known as Xerxes, ruled from 486–465 BC. The story of Esther occurs about fifty-five years after King Cyrus sent his decree throughout Persia that allowed Jews to return to Judah to rebuild the temple (538 BC). Esther 2:5-6 provides genealogical details for Mordecai, Esther's cousin and legal guardian, saying his great-grandfather Kish was taken into exile in 597 BC. Esther's family had been in exile for well over a century.

Embedded in Esther's colorful story—filled with beauty treatments, harems, lavish banquets, and dangerous requests—there was a power struggle. Two men serving the king began to clash. Haman, a descendant of Agag and recently promoted official, took offense when Mordecai, Esther's guardian, refused to honor him. When he learned Mordecai was a Jew, Haman decided to destroy all of Mordecai's people with him (v. 6). Haman would not rest until Mordecai—and every Jew—was put to death.

As the highest-ranking official in the nation, Haman posed an imminent threat to God's people throughout the entire kingdom of Persia. With malicious intent, Haman moved every political mountain he could to eliminate Mordecai and his people. Finally, he manipulated King Ahasuerus to decree the annihilation of the Jews (vv. 8-15).

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

Though shocked and in a state of mourning over the deadly decree, Mordecai didn't give up the fight. Five years before Haman had concocted his murderous plot, a young Jewish girl named Hadassah was plucked out of obscurity to become Queen Esther of Persia (2:7,16-17). Mordecai rightly recognized this providential placement and urged Esther to use her influence with the king: "Perhaps you have come to your royal position for such a time as this" (4:14).

The events of the book of Esther read quickly, yet they take place over a decade (483–473 BC). We see the sudden seismic shifts in the story, but we must recognize that many mundane moments passed by in the meantime and that God was working all along. The events that turn our lives upside down do not come as a surprise to God. He's been preparing us for "such a time" all along.

LEADER NOTE: The entire story of Esther follows an inverted, parallel pattern forming a giant "V" outline beginning with the prologue (ch. 1), the king's first decree (ch. 2–3), and Haman's building of the gallows for Mordecai (ch. 4–5). The pivot point is the king's sleepless night (ch. 6), leading to Mordecai's triumph over Haman (ch. 6–7), the king's second decree protecting the Jews (ch. 8–9), and the epilogue (ch. 10). The literary structure of this book points to God's ability to reverse the evil plans of man.

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

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). 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.

Notes

**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).

Circle the orders given for the defense and preservation of the Jews.

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.

The theme of favor runs through the story of Esther. She first found favor "in the eyes of everyone who saw her" (2:15) and then with the king, gaining "more favor and approval" than all the other women (2:17). Later when Esther risked her life before the king, "she gained favor with him" (5:2) and appealed to that favor in her petitions (5:8; 7:3; 8:5). Esther's rise to royalty was not due to her pretty face and charismatic personality. She didn't earn the crown. Esther had the gracious hand of God upon her life orchestrating these events for His glory and good purposes, even though He is not explicitly named in the story.

LEADER NOTE: The book of Esther never mentions God. Neither Mordecai, Esther, nor the narrator credit with a formal role the One working all things for the protection of His people. Yet His presence, power, and providence permeate the story. Evidence of His favor marks every scene. This shines clearer when we view Esther as one chapter in the larger redemption narrative. Biblical truths about God clearly revealed elsewhere emerge here too: He directs kings' hearts (Prov. 21:1), hears His people's pleas (Ps. 34:17), and turns evil for their good (Gen. 45:5-7; Rom. 8:28). Even when we cannot sense God's tangible presence, we can trust His favor is at work in our lives too.

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

Notes

We tend to read stories seeking a hero to emulate, distilling them down into three alliterative application points for self-improvement. Yet a careful, honest reading through Esther reveals both Mordecai and Esther as works in progress. Even in their correspondence back and forth, there is no mention of trust in God. We can read between the lines and see that God, indeed, was working. But there is no glaring internal evidence from the book itself that Mordecai or Esther possessed the heroic faith we hold them so high for having.

Granting that Esther and Mordecai were the best versions we hope they were, although there are lessons we can learn from their example, ultimately neither of them is the hero of the story. The main takeaway of the book is not to become more like Esther or Mordecai; it is to trust in the provision and power of our all-seeing, all-powerful, all-faithful covenant-keeping God. He is the hero of the story.

LEADER NOTE: The celebration and holiday referenced in Esther 8:17 sparked a regular rhythm of annual celebration for God's people known as the Feast of Purim (9:26-28). Many Jews still observe it today, during which the book of Esther is read the night before the Feast of Purim begins and then again on Purim day. Some scholars believe Jesus may have celebrated Purim as the unnamed feast mentioned in John 5:1.

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

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.

ARRIVAL

INTERACT: As adults arrive, ask if they've ever witnessed a rescue, whether on the news, in a movie, or in person. Whether the rescues were based on a true story or pure fiction, discuss: "Why do you think we are drawn to stories of rescue? How might the concept of a rescue be part of something bigger?" After discussion has died down, read Psalm 71:1-3.

CONTEXT

SAY: The book of Esther takes place in Persia, where many Jewish people were still living in exile. King Ahasuerus, unaware of Queen Esther's Jewish identity, had issued a decree that called for the destruction of the Jews. Haman, the king's right-hand man, had engineered this execution date. However, God had divinely placed Esther "for such a time as this" in a position to intercede, leading to a counter-decree and the deliverance of God's people (Esth. 4:14). Yet God's work in Esther wasn't just about saving the Jews from immediate destruction. He was preserving His people so that His covenant promises would continue. The Jews were the people through whom the Messiah would come, and if they were wiped out, the hope of salvation for all people would have been lost.

TRANSITION: God's hand in Esther's story points to His ultimate rescue mission—sending Jesus to redeem and rescue not just the Jews but all people of every tribe, tongue, and nation. The Lord's sovereignty is at work, even in the midst of human decisions, to bring about His greater redemptive plan.

RECAP

DISCUSS: Though His name is never mentioned in the book of Esther, God's hand is evident. How did you see God's faithfulness in your personal preparation this week?

TRANSITION: As we examine the story of Esther, we will look at some various ways Esther and Mordecai responded to troubling situations. We'll also consider these through a case study exercise to see how we might and/or should respond in light of God's good and sovereign hand in our lives.



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GROUP ACTIVITY

Notes

CASE STUDY: Direct your group to page 82 in their Personal Study Guide (PSG), where they will find a case study activity titled “What Would You Do?” Recreate the response sections on a board so you can record the group’s thoughts.

What Would You Do?

Read the case study below and consider Esther’s and Mordecai’s examples for possible ways to respond. Finally, consider what you would do.

CASE STUDY: Recently, a new government law has declared that churches must submit all sermon manuscripts for approval before preaching. Failure to comply could lead to heavy fines, imprisonment, or even the closure of the church. You and your fellow church members must decide how to proceed.

CONCEAL
Esther 2:10-11,20

DEFY
Esther 3:1-5

SUBMIT
Esther 7:1-4

What would you do?

READ: Invite a volunteer to read Esther 3:7-9,13.

MENTION: As Christians living in the West, we do not often experience direct threats or persecution from government agencies such as the threats the Jews faced. But one day we may need to decide what to do in response to government censure.

ENGAGE: Read the case study to the large group, and then form and designate three teams to consider and apply one of the optional responses. Invite a member from each team to read the passage. Instruct the teams to identify how the people responded to Haman’s or the king’s actions and then to discuss how we might apply that example to the case study. After a few minutes, ask a representative from each team to reveal their ideas. Write these on the board so adults may add them to the activity in their PSG.

Notes

DISCUSS: Though any tension between the Jews and others is not apparent at the beginning of the book, Mordecai cautioned Esther to conceal her heritage (Esth. 2:10-11,20). What are some other examples of God's people who faced persecution going into hiding or concealing their meetings? (*Elijah and prophets hid from Jezebel [1 Kings 17-19]; secret churches in countries antagonistic to Christianity*) "What are some other occasions when God's people openly defied those who opposed their faithfulness to the Lord?" (*Daniel's friends faced the furnace [Dan. 3]; Peter and John preached the gospel [Acts 4:18-20]*) "When were God's people expected to submit to unbelieving governing authorities?" (*the Jews were commanded to settle in Babylon and seek the peace of the city [Jer. 29]; Paul and Peter encouraged Christians to honor the governing authorities [Rom. 13:1; Titus 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:13]*)

READ: Invite a volunteer to read Esther 8:5,11-13,17.

DISCUSS: "How did God rescue His people from Haman's imminent threat? How might we apply this example to our case study? What role does faith in God's sovereignty play in making difficult decisions?" Allow a moment for the group to consider "What Would You Do?" in the activity, and call for responses.

DEBRIEF

How can we know the wise and godly response when facing persecution?

How does knowing that God not only rescues but also preserves His people shape our decisions?

SUMMARIZE

The story of Esther reminds us that God is always at work, even when His people face destruction. He not only rescues but preserves His people so that His greater redemptive plan may be accomplished.

HEAD, HEART, HANDS

Walk the group through the Head, Heart, Hands section in the PSG (p. 83). If running short on time, specifically highlight the **Hands** section in this week's study, inviting volunteers to share their responses to the question in this section.



HEAD: There are no accidents in the kingdom of God. He sees all, knows all, and allows only what ultimately will bring forth the greatest good for His people and His glory. Our job is to remember that He is always in control, regardless of how chaotic or dire our situation may seem.

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



HEART: God's favor is a magnificent gift, and His grace continually surrounds us. His hand is in everything for our good. There is no such

thing as luck. His providence rules. As we allow this reality to root deeply into our hearts, God's promised peace can bloom in our lives (Phil. 4:7).

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



HANDS: God bestowed favor on Esther with great purpose, not simply so she could become queen and enjoy the "good" life. God granted her great influence so she could save not only her own life but also the lives of many. God's plans are much bigger than just one soul. We're not meant to be cul-de-sacs of God's favor. We are designed to be conduits of God's grace. Though we can't force anyone to receive Jesus and His gift of forgiveness and eternal life, we can share the gospel with all who will hear its magnificent news.

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

NEXT STEPS

Challenge the group to consider these actions as responses to this week's session.

- Reflect on a time when you felt abandoned or helpless. How did God work behind the scenes to sustain and rescue you? Commit to trusting His unseen hand, even when your circumstances seem dire.
- Esther risked everything to intercede for God's people. Identify one bold step you can take this week in obedience to Him.
- Today, many believers across the world face life-threatening persecution. Set aside time to pray for their perseverance and for God's protection over them. Consider ways to support them tangibly.

Invite volunteers to share prayer needs for this week. Encourage them to record these in the space on page 83 in their PSG so they can pray for others throughout the week.

PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES

PRAYING SCRIPTURE

CLOSE: Pray through Psalm 71:19-24. Thank God that no matter what we face, He will redeem it for His glory and our good. Pray that He will comfort us and revive us again as He has promised.

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.

As you examine Nehemiah 1:5-11; 6:2-9,15-16:

- Highlight that the restoration of God's people began with confession and repentance.
- Receive encouragement that even God's enemies recognize His powerful work in the lives of His people.



TIMELINE

The First Group of Jews Returns
and Rebuilds the Temple (Ezra 1–6)

Ezra the Priest Returns to Judah and
Instructs the People in the Law (Ezra 7–10)

Ezra Reads the Book of the Law
in Celebration (Nehemiah 8)

Esther and Mordecai Rescue God's
People from Destruction (Esther 1–10)

SESSION STUDY: Nehemiah Returns and Rebuilds
the Wall Around Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1–6)

Daily Readings

☐ **Day 1:** Ezra 4:6–23

☐ **Day 2:** Ezra 7:1–8:36

☐ **Day 3:** Ezra 9:1–10:44

☐ **Day 4:** Nehemiah 1:1–3:32

☐ **Day 5:** Nehemiah 4:1–6:19

☐ **Day 6:** Psalm 41



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

Notes



SCAN ME

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.

WITH REPENTANCE COMES RESTORATION (NEHEMIAH 1:5-11).

Underline any words or phrases relating to God's covenant with His people.

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.

After hearing about the distressing condition of the returned exiles and Jerusalem itself, Nehemiah turned to prayer. He did not suppress his emotions; he wept and mourned "for a number of days" (v. 4), but he also fasted and prayed for God's forgiveness and favor.

What is your first reaction when you hear distressing news?

Nehemiah's prayer was based on the covenant God made with the Israelites, and Nehemiah's hope was founded on God's character. On multiple occasions during their forty-year trek through the desert, God reminded the Israelites that one of the consequences for not upholding their part of the covenant would be exile from the promised land (Lev. 26:27-33; Deut. 28:58-68). At the time of Nehemiah's prayer, this had already happened. Nehemiah acknowledged the people's sins (Neh. 1:6-7), but he also recalled the redemption promised when the people repented (v. 9). Though God had restored the people to their land, the restoration wasn't yet complete.

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.

LEADER NOTE: Nehemiah's prayed (1) acknowledging God's character (v. 5); (2) confessing personal and corporate sin (vv. 6-7); (3) recalling God's promises (vv. 8-10); and (4) petitioning God to act (v. 11). Often our prayers focus on petition, asking God for something. In Nehemiah's prayer, however, his petition almost sounds like an afterthought of his praise for God and His faithfulness. This structure is a verbal picture of Nehemiah's humility and familiarity with God's covenant and an excellent model for us to follow.

While we might not ever be exiled from our physical homes, our disobedience to God will bring consequences. But He doesn't leave us without hope! Deuteronomy 28 contain intense curses for the Israelites' disobedience, but Deuteronomy 30:1-10 shows God's heart behind the punishment: to bring His people back to Him and bless them. Nehemiah knew this, and his prayer reflected his trust in God's faithfulness.

Nehemiah prayed this prayer about a thousand years after the establishment of God's covenant with Israel, yet he spoke of God's promises like they were personal and active. They were! Nehemiah lived under the old covenant, and believers today live under the new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34; Luke 22:20; Heb. 9:15), but God's character and plan for the world remain the same. Just as Nehemiah descended from Abraham's line, we too are spiritual descendants of Abraham (Gal. 3:6-7). We can rest on God's faithfulness just like Nehemiah did.

LEADER NOTE: God's discipline can be a hard concept to grasp. First, not every bad thing that happens is a direct consequence of personal sin (see Job 1-2). Second, for God's children, discipline is different than condemnation; it is sanctification. God disciplines His beloved children like a good parent (Prov. 3:12). This is God's way of bringing us back to Him, just as He did with the Israelites.

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).

Underline the dialogue in this passage, noting the motivation of each person speaking.

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.

LEADER NOTE: In Nehemiah 2–5, King Artaxerxes allowed Nehemiah to go to Jerusalem to help his people, but some surrounding leaders became angry. Nehemiah and a team of Israelite families began rebuilding the wall, but they were halted for a time by opposition before they could resume building. Nehemiah 5 paints a picture of Nehemiah’s servant leadership and his efforts to end the oppression of the poor in Jerusalem. Nehemiah 6 then addresses more of the opposition and Nehemiah’s response.

Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem appear in 2:19 and chapter 4. Sanballat was the governor of Samaria, Tobiah was an Ammonite and possibly the governor east of the Jordan River, and Geshem was an Arab, one of those who had settled in the Negev and trans-Jordan area.¹ These foreign leaders opposed Nehemiah’s efforts to rebuild Jerusalem’s wall from the beginning and are mentioned together in 6:1. When Sanballat and Geshem approached Nehemiah in this passage, the wall almost entirely finished, but they still tried to thwart Nehemiah’s plans.

Nehemiah easily recognized their deceit and refused to be intimidated (vv. 2,10-13). Rather than engaging in their false accusations or halting his work (vv. 6-7), Nehemiah responded firmly and truthfully (v. 8). Instead of entering into a debate or attempting to prove the men wrong, he prayed to the Lord: “But now, my God, strengthen my hands” (v. 9).

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

LEADER NOTE: In 6:10-14, another opponent, Shemaiah, tried to lure Nehemiah to the temple to “protect” him from his adversaries. Nehemiah recognized that entering the temple to hide from his enemies would be sinful, and as a result he would be discredited (v. 13). Nehemiah was not a priest, so to enter the temple would go against God’s commands (Num. 18:7). Additionally, to enter the temple as a hiding place would demonstrate lack of faith in God’s protection against Nehemiah’s enemies.

Nehemiah remained faithful to the task God set before him, unshaken by repeated obstacles and opposition. Because of this, the wall was finished, and God blessed Nehemiah’s efforts and glorified His own name (Neh. 6:15-16). Because of it, the surrounding nations recognized Jerusalem’s success as the work of God.

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

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.

ARRIVAL

INTERACT: As adults arrive, encourage them to list on a board their favorite renovation and restoration TV shows, websites, and social media content. As they write their answers, ask: “Why do you like this content?” Point out any similarities in their responses.

CONTEXT

SAY: In previous weeks, we discovered God’s hand at work even as the people of Israel lived through exile as a result of their disobedience to God. Most recently we saw God work through His people as they rebuilt the temple. We all love a good restoration story. Nehemiah had the task of restoring the wall of Jerusalem, and he did it successfully because God was on his side.

TRANSITION: So today, we begin a new unit that focuses on the Israelites’ return home from exile. For the next several weeks, we will discover God’s desire for His people to return to Him, seek Him, worship Him, obey Him, and enjoy the fruit of a covenant relationship with Him. We will also see God’s prophecy and promise of the coming Messiah who would create lasting peace.

RECAP

ASK: Which verses impacted you the most in your personal preparation this week?

SAY: The personal preparation for this week gave us a glimpse into the leadership of Nehemiah as he confessed the sins of his people and asked God to bless the work of the people as they sought to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem. Nehemiah asked for God’s blessing not because of the people’s goodness or faithfulness but based on God’s covenant with them. We also saw God’s favor on the people as they built the wall despite serious opposition from neighboring rulers: Sanballat, who lived to the north; Tobiah, who governed east of the Jordan River; and Geshem, who ruled south of Judah. As a result, the surrounding nations saw God’s glory and sovereign care over Israel.

TRANSITION: Let’s compare the story in Nehemiah to Jesus’s interaction with someone in the New Testament to see God’s heart for people to return to Him.



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

GROUP ACTIVITY

Notes

CHART: Direct your group to page 92 in their Personal Study Guide (PSG), where they will find a chart titled “God’s Desire for Restoration.” Recreate this chart on a board in your room so you can record the group’s responses.

God’s Desire for Restoration		
Read the Scripture passages below. Fill in the chart comparing the various aspects of the Israelites’ story in Nehemiah with Peter’s story in John.		
	THE ISRAELITES Nehemiah 1:5-11; 6:2-9,15-16	PETER John 18:15-17,25-27; 21:15-19
How They Sinned		
How They Reacted		
How God Restored Them		

READ: Enlist four volunteers to read passages. Start with Nehemiah 1:5-11. Direct the group to point out the sins Nehemiah mentioned and elements of repentance in his prayer. Instruct them to record answers in their PSG as you record responses on the chart. Then call on the second volunteer to read 6:2-9,15-16. Direct the group to identify how God restored the Israelites.

ANALYZE: Review Nehemiah’s experience by asking: “What does Nehemiah’s prayer tell us about repentance? How is repentance countercultural?” (*culture tells us repentance is unnecessary; people today don’t believe in personal sin; some think good actions can outweigh bad ones*) “What does Nehemiah’s prayer tell us about the character of God?” (*God restored His people by blessing their efforts to rebuild the wall*) “How did God receive glory in this story?”

TRANSITION: Briefly summarize the group’s findings in the story of Nehemiah.

READ: Call on the remaining volunteers to read John 18:15-17,25-27 and 21:15-19. As a group, note Peter’s sin and find elements of repentance, restoration, and

Notes

praise of God in the exchange between Jesus and Peter. Invite them to write down their responses in the PSG as you fill in the chart on the board.

ANALYZE: Discuss Peter's restoration by asking: "In John 21:15-17, how did Peter demonstrate repentance, and how did Jesus restore Peter? How might Jesus's repeated questions have been an act of love toward Peter? What glimpse of Peter's future do verses 18-19 offer? Based on what you know about Peter's story in the New Testament, how did Peter's repentance and restoration bring God glory?" (reference Acts 2:41 and 10:44-45 if needed) Fill in the rest of the chart with your answers where appropriate.

DEBRIEF

How does Nehemiah's prayer and the rebuilding of Jerusalem's wall reveal God's character and commitment to restore His people?

How might repenting from sin and turning to Jesus bring honor and glory to Him?

SUMMARIZE

When God's people sin and stray from Him, He still wants to be with His people and maintain that relationship, so He uses discipline and consequences. He did that with the Israelites after their exile, returning them to the land and rebuilding and restoring the temple and Jerusalem's city wall. God wants to restore our lives as a demonstration to the world that He is sovereign, at work, and desires all people to come to Him.

HEAD, HEART, HANDS

Walk the group through the Head, Heart, Hands section in the PSG (p. 93). If running short on time, specifically highlight the **Head** section in this week's study, inviting volunteers to share their responses to the question in this section.



HEAD: Today, we constantly face individualism, tribalism, difficult personal decisions, and distressing world events. We know God's character from Scripture, but we're so quick to forget His faithfulness. One of the most notable things about Nehemiah is how many times he turned to prayer before speaking, acting, or making decisions, even when his life was threatened.

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



HEART: Nehemiah's opponents tried to intimidate the Jews to thwart their plans. Their dislike became anger and then threats. Nehemiah was unshaken, not by his own power but by constantly remembering the Lord's faithfulness. Nehemiah's heart, words, and actions reflected his trust in God's character. And the Lord rewarded his efforts by protecting the Jews and letting the wall be completed, resulting in His own glory.

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



HANDS: Because of Nehemiah's humility, faithfulness, and leadership, some consider him a type of Christ. Both were in the work of restoration; both exemplified humility and faithfulness. Both confronted opposition. Jesus, however, is our ultimate restorer, foregoing His rights as God and dying a humiliating death for our redemption and restoration (Phil. 2:5-11).

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

NEXT STEPS

Challenge the group to consider these actions as responses to this session.

- Read Psalm 51, David's prayer of repentance for his sin with Bathsheba. Use his prayer to confess sins in your life for which you need to repent.
- Reflect on times in your life when you repented of sin and experienced God's loving restoration.
- Intentionally look for ways God is glorified in others' lives because they chose to repent and return to Him.

Invite volunteers to share prayer needs for this week. Encourage them to record these in the space on page 93 in their PSG so they can pray for others throughout the week.

PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES

PRAYING SCRIPTURE

CLOSE: Pray through Psalm 41 with your group, focusing on verses 11-12. Thank the Lord that though we may be threatened by those who oppose the gospel, we find comfort and security in God's presence.

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), Ne 2:10–19.

EZRA THE PRIEST

By Caroline Chong



As a man with a book of the Bible bearing his name, Ezra may be one of the least well-known figures on the historical timeline of Scripture, yet he was instrumental in the spiritual health and well-being of the Jews who returned home after their exile to Babylon. Ezra was a priest descended directly from the high priest Aaron, Moses's brother (Ezra 7:1-5), and he was a scribe, "an expert in matters of the LORD's commands and statutes for Israel" (v. 11).

RETURN FROM EXILE

In 538 BC, King Cyrus of Persia allowed Israelites to return to their homeland after several decades of living as exiles in the Babylonian Empire (1:1-4). Zerubbabel led the first major group of returnees, who rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem and reinstated the worship of the Lord (Ezra 1-6).

Ezra led the second major wave of exiles returning to Judah in 458 BC, about eighty years after Cyrus's initial decree (7:1-9). King Artaxerxes gave Ezra permission, protection, and provisions to return to Jerusalem with any Israelites who wished to go; he also gave Ezra authority over anyone "west of the Euphrates" to teach them God's law for the good of the Persian Kingdom (vv. 12-26)!

Ezra is a beautiful example of humility in leadership. He took time gathering people to return to Jerusalem with him, seeking qualified and willing Levites to serve in the temple, even though he himself was a priest (8:1-20). He knew that he couldn't and shouldn't do this task alone. Furthermore, Ezra proclaimed a fast among the returnees before

their journey to humble themselves and ask for God's protection for their travels (vv. 21-23). And once they arrived safely, Ezra led them in three days of rest before beginning their work (v. 32).

PURIFICATION OF THE PEOPLE

Soon after arriving in Jerusalem, Ezra was informed of a grave situation that had developed among the first group of returnees—many had intermarried with those from the surrounding peoples, pagans with detestable practices (9:1-2). Devastated, Ezra offered a prayer of corporate confession for this sin of the people (vv. 3-15), and then he began the messy but necessary work of sending away the foreign wives and children the Israelite men and leaders had taken (Ezra 10).

This purification of the community was less about racial differences and more about religious ones, seeing as intermarriage and idolatry had previously led the Israelites to imitate the pagan nations around them and thereby earn their exile in the first place. The New Testament would address this same problem by saying:

Do not be yoked together with those who do not believe. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? . . . And what agreement does the temple of God have with idols? For we are the temple of the living God. (2 Cor. 6:14,16)

*Ezra is a beautiful example of humility in leadership. . . .
He knew that he couldn't and shouldn't do this task alone.*

Ezra didn't assume a self-righteous attitude over the people in this matter but led with conviction and humility, grieving their sins. For their own good, he sought the Israelites' faithful obedience to God's law, no matter how difficult the process.

About twelve years later, Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem in 445 BC, and he and Ezra served alongside one another in the leadership of the people. After Nehemiah rebuilt the city wall, an assembly was called in which Ezra read aloud the book of the Law to all the people who were gathered. Making sure the people understood what was read, he led them in renewing their joyful obedience to the Lord, who had rescued them from their exile (Neh. 8).

Ezra the priest modeled being a selfless servant-leader and thereby foreshadowed the perfect great high priest to come—Jesus Christ.

FORESHADOW OF CHRIST

In the person of Ezra we see a type, or foreshadow, of Christ. The main purpose of Ezra's return to the land was to study God's law, obey it, and teach it to the returned exiles in Israel (Ezra 7:10). Almost five centuries later, young Jesus astounded the teachers in the temple with His understanding and answers (Luke 2:46-47), obeyed God's law perfectly in the wilderness and throughout His life (Luke 4:1-13; Heb. 4:15), and taught the fullness of God's meaning and intent behind His law (Matt. 5-7; Luke 6:20-49).

Ezra lamented the Israelites' unfaithfulness to God (Ezra 9:3-5); Jesus wept over Jerusalem just days before being crucified by His own people (Luke 19:41-44). Ezra assumed the people's sins and confessed them to God, despite having played no part in them (Ezra 9:6-15). The sinless Christ humbly bore our guilt and shame on the cross that we might have a relationship with Him and be pardoned from God's just judgment of our sins (1 Pet. 2:22-25). Ezra the priest modeled being a selfless servant-leader and thereby foreshadowed the perfect great high priest to come—Jesus Christ (Heb. 4:14-16).

Caroline Chong, previously a nurse, Caroline graduated from Beeson Divinity School in 2024 with her Master of Arts in Theological Studies. She is passionate about teaching biblical theology for the average churchgoer and loves church history. She and her husband, Marn, live in Birmingham, Alabama, with their baby, Phoebe, and dog, Penny.

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.

As you examine Nehemiah 8:2-12:

- Note the connection that reading God's Word leads us to worship Him.
- Recognize that rightly understanding God's Word causes us to both mourn our sin and rejoice in our salvation found in Christ.



TIMELINE

The First Group of Jews Returns and Rebuilds the Temple (Ezra 1-6)

Ezra the Priest Returns to Judah and Instructs the People in the Law (Ezra 7-10)

SESSION STUDY:
Ezra Reads the Book of the Law in Celebration (Nehemiah 8)

Esther and Mordecai Rescue God's People from Destruction (Esther 1-10)

Nehemiah Returns and Rebuilds the Wall Around Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1-6)

The People Confess Their Sin, Vow Faithfulness, and Dedicate the Wall (Nehemiah 9-12)

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 |



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

GOD'S WORD SHOULD LEAD US TOWARD WORSHIP
(NEHEMIAH 8:2-6).

Circle the actions in this passage, especially those performed by Ezra and the Israelites in response.

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, Mishaël, 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.

Ezra's role as scribe and priest was to know the law intimately and guide the people in keeping it. Therefore, he led this public reading, surrounded by other teachers of the law, the Levites. Although we don't know with certainty, it seems that public readings had been neglected since the first group of Jews returned from exile. Each person didn't have a copy of the Scriptures as we do now, so they depended on public readings to know and remember God's commands. Before this reading of God's Word, some of the people may have been familiar with parts of it, but it was necessary to read the entire law to turn their hearts toward God collectively.

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.

One of Ezra's main tasks in returning to Jerusalem was to reinstate proper worship of God and observance of the law. When Ezra read the law, the people worshiped and bowed down. Notice their initial reaction was to praise God for His Word, and then they wept over their sin. It's right to grieve our sin, but to do so without first recognizing God's character overlooks the grace that He gives. God's law speaks to us and about us, but we aren't the main characters. It's about God and His purposes.

LEADER NOTE: Priests in Israel were descendants of Aaron, ordained by God to act as representatives in His presence on behalf of the people and to teach the law (Lev. 8–10). Through several prophets, God rebuked the shepherds (priests) of Israel for failing to instruct or misleading the flock, which ultimately led to their exile (Jer. 23:1–4; 50:6; Ezek. 34). Ezra devoted himself to teaching God's laws (Ezra 7:10), and he took his role seriously by leading the people in the hearing of God's Word and worship.

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

LEADER NOTE: Licentiousness is an overemphasis of God's grace and underemphasis of His law. Legalism is just the opposite. Balancing grace and truth in our lives can be tricky, especially depending on our various backgrounds and worldviews. God holds His children to the standard of His Word, but the very fact that He has given us His Word is a gracious gift! We should be convicted of our sins by the Holy Spirit through Scripture, but we should also give Him thanks for loving us enough to use conviction to bring us to Him. If our conviction stops at guilt and shame, we haven't grasped the full gospel.

Kneeling, bowing, or falling to the ground is a common picture throughout Scripture. In the ancient Near East, this was a physical expression of recognizing the authority or divinity of another. In Scripture, those who bow down before anyone other than the true God are often rebuked (Matt. 4:9–10; Acts 10:25–26; Rev. 22:8–9). Kneeling facedown represented humility before the Lord, submitting to His Word and sovereignty. The Israelites recognized God's greatness through His law, and after blessing Him by standing, lifting their hands, and shouting "Amen," they lowered themselves in adoration.

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).

Underline the commands to the Israelites in this passage.

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 Israelites worshiped upon hearing God’s Word. When they realized how they and their ancestors had broken God’s law, however, they mourned, recognizing they had acted corruptly toward their holy God. Just like the Israelites, we can’t properly grieve our sin if we don’t first grasp the character of the God against whom we sin.

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

Once the Levites explained the law, the people were encouraged. “Don’t grieve,” they were told, because “this day is holy.” According to the law, that day, the first day of the seventh month (v. 2), was a day of rest and commemoration as the people prepared for the Day of Atonement and the Festival of Shelters (Lev. 23:24-25,27,34).

They also were told not to grieve because “the joy of the LORD is your strength” (Neh. 8:10). Although solemn repentance was a healthy reaction, the purpose of this gathering was to renew the people’s covenant with God, which was a joyous thing. Not only had God recently restored them, but reading the book of the Law reminded them that the Lord had saved their people in the past as well. God’s joy in His people was their source of strength and protection.

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.

The commands in this passage (rejoice, eat, drink, send, and be still) revolve around delighting in God's gifts, sharing those gifts with others, and resting in the mercy He gives. Life with God is not one of restriction and blind obedience but one of abundance within His loving boundaries.

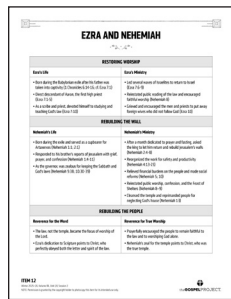
LEADER NOTE: God's boundaries for humankind are not a consequence of the first sin. They existed even before the fall in Genesis 3 (see Gen. 2:15-17). His boundaries have always been for our flourishing. A legalistic view of life sees enjoying things as dangerous and to be avoided, but this perspective fails to take the whole Word of God into account. He tells us throughout Scripture to live fully (John 10:10), enjoying the good things He has given us (Deut. 14:26-29; Eccl. 2:24-26). But we must keep them in their proper place as created things, not worshiping them as only the Creator deserves.

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

We should mourn our sins, not from a place of unhealthy fear or self-hatred but from a place of reverence for God. This mourning should be followed by joy because God doesn't leave us dead in our sins. His heart is to see us return to Him, and He graciously provides the mercy and forgiveness necessary to make that happen.

LEADER NOTE: Since Christ's death and resurrection, our turning to God is possible through faith in Him and obedience to His teachings. Those who lived before Christ lived under the old covenant, and this return to God was possible by trusting His promises through obedience (Deut. 30:1-10). This may sound like works-based righteousness, but even in the Old Testament, obedience was a result of faith in God and His Word and receiving His grace.

Notes



ARRIVAL

INTERACT: As adults arrive, ask: “What is your favorite book? What makes this book special?” Take note of any repeated books as well as any common themes among the books discussed.

TRANSITION: There are many good books out there, but none compare to God’s Word. Today we will discover the impact of an important book—the book of the Law, one part of Scripture. We will see how it drew God’s people to repentance, worship, and joy.

CONTEXT

SUMMARIZE: The books of Ezra and Nehemiah chronicle the return of the Jewish people to Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile. *(Pass out copies of the handout **Pack Item 12: Ezra and Nehemiah** and use it to highlight the main headings for the ministries of Ezra and Nehemiah.)* These two books of the Bible tell about the challenges the people faced as they sought to return home and rebuild the temple, the walls of Jerusalem, the city itself, and their lives.

SAY: Last week we focused on Nehemiah as he confessed his and the people’s sins and asked God to restore the nation because of His covenant and His character. We saw God answer Nehemiah’s prayer by blessing their rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem, revealing His glory and sovereignty not only to God’s people but also to the surrounding peoples.

RECAP

REVIEW: Direct the group to share the most impactful part for them from this week’s personal preparation. Also invite the group to ask questions related to the study, and provide answers as you are able. *(It’s okay to say, “I don’t know. Let’s both do some research this week to see if we can find the answer.”)*

TRANSITION: Drawing on our personal preparation with the Scripture this week, today we will discuss the role of Scripture in an individual’s relationship with God.



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GROUP ACTIVITY

Notes

CHART: Call attention to page 102 in the Personal Study Guide (PSG), where adults will see a chart titled “Encountering the Book.” Recreate this chart on a board or large sheet of paper in your room. You will record the results of the group activity as adults dig into the Scripture text.

Encountering the Book		
Read Nehemiah 8:2-12. Write in the columns below how the different groups interacted with the book of the Law and the result.		
	INTERACTION	RESULT
Ezra and the Levites		
Returning Exiles		
Believers Today		

INSTRUCT: Form pairs or small teams and direct each team to read Nehemiah 8:2-12. Instruct them to complete the first two rows of the chart in their PSG by writing how the different groups interacted with the book of the Law and what resulted from that interaction. Encourage teams to use the personal preparation in their PSG to help them with their work.

REPORT: When teams have finished their work, instruct them to report their findings one team at a time. As each team shares, write down their responses on the table on the board.

ASK: Leaving room for responses after each question, ask: “Why do you think the Israelites were told not to mourn or weep (vv. 9,11)? What do you think verse 10 means when it says, ‘The joy of the LORD is your strength’? How do you think the people felt hearing the book of the Law after being in exile for so

Notes

long?” Point out that some of the people returning had been in exile for a large portion of their adult lives or had even been born in exile. Allow the group to share their thoughts and insights.

INSTRUCT: Guide the teams to talk about the last row—ways that believers can interact with Scripture today. Direct teams to fill out the row in their PSG, listing how believers encounter the Bible today and the possible results of those encounters. After several minutes, call on the teams to share what they wrote.

DEBRIEF

How does your present situation affect your perspective of God’s Word?

Why do you think most people today do not respond to Scripture the same way the returnees did?

SUMMARIZE

In Nehemiah 8, we saw how the reading of the book of the Law led the Jews in Jerusalem to mourn their faithlessness toward God and to fall on their knees in worship before God’s holiness. We saw Ezra encourage the people to celebrate and rejoice in what God had done. That joy and perspective of God’s sovereignty and provision in their lives would give them strength for the days ahead.

HEAD, HEART, HANDS

Walk the group through the Head, Heart, Hands section in the PSG (p. 103). If running short on time, specifically highlight the **Hands** section in this week’s study, inviting volunteers to share their responses to the question in this section.



HEAD: The public reading of God’s Word likely had been neglected for many years among the Israelites. They were a people who had a longstanding relationship with God, but this didn’t mean they automatically knew His Word. Today, we often fall into the trap of cultural or “inherited” Christianity, believing that because we grew up going to church or live generally good lives, we have a saving relationship with the Lord. Unfortunately, this often leads to neglect of reading God’s Word, which then leads to low biblical understanding or acceptance of non-biblical teachings as “Christian.”

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



HEART: When the Israelites were refreshed with God’s Word, they praised God. The law reminded them of their ancestors’ salvation from slavery, their covenant with God, His guidance and provision, and His compassion for them despite their rebellion. They recognized their own salvation from exile and recognized the Lord’s faithfulness despite their unfaithfulness. They properly mourned their sin, but by God’s grace, joy and gladness had the final say.

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



HANDS: In Nehemiah 8:13-18, the people celebrated the Festival of Shelters in accordance with the law (Deut. 16:16). The renewal of their covenant with God led them to joyfully celebrate and obey like they had not done since “the days of Joshua son of Nun” (Neh. 8:17)! While the power for change ultimately rests with the Holy Spirit, we, like the Jews, must take part in our covenant with God by reading and delighting in His commands.

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?

NEXT STEPS

Challenge the group to consider these actions as responses to this week's session.

- Evaluate your commitment to God's Word. How does interacting with Scripture lead to repentance and worship in your life?
- Read Hebrews 4:12 and reflect on how it relates to Nehemiah 8:2-12.
- Take time to consider the ways God has demonstrated His love and mercy toward you. Pause and celebrate before the Lord by giving Him thanks.

Invite volunteers to share prayer needs for this week. Encourage them to record these in the space on page 103 in their PSG so they can pray for others throughout the week.

PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES

PRAYING SCRIPTURE

CLOSE: Pray through a section of Psalm 119 with your group (consider vv. 33-40 or 41-48). Thank God for the ability to handle, read, hear, and savor His precepts.

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.

As you examine Nehemiah 9:1-3; 12:27-30:

- Recognize that the people understood their need to confess their sin and recommit to the covenant.
- Reflect on the fact that holiness often requires separation from the things that lead us into sin.



TIMELINE

Ezra the Priest Returns to Judah and Instructs the People in the Law (Ezra 7-10)

Ezra Reads the Book of the Law in Celebration (Nehemiah 8)

Nehemiah Is Zealous for the Sabbath (Nehemiah 13)

Nehemiah Returns and Rebuilds the Wall Around Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1-6)

SESSION STUDY: The People Confess Their Sin, Vow Faithfulness, and Dedicate the Wall (Nehemiah 9-12)

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 |



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

CONFESSION AND VALUING GOD'S WORD ARE PART OF RECONCILIATION WITH GOD (NEHEMIAH 9:1-3).

Circle the actions of the Israelites that revealed their seriousness about their sins.

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.

Fasting, wearing sackcloth, and putting dust (sometimes translated “earth” or “dirt”) on one’s head were all acts of mourning and repentance in the ancient Near East. Fasting, or foregoing food for a time, is an act of humility and a reminder of our total dependence on the Lord. Wearing sackcloth and putting dust on one’s head weren’t commanded by God’s law, but they were cultural ways of expressing grief.

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

The text says that the Israelites separated themselves from the foreigners among them. By this time, many had returned to the land who weren’t physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel (Jacob), but any resident alien who drew near to worship the Lord would be accepted (Num. 15:13-16; cf. Isa. 56:3-8). Both Rahab, a Canaanite prostitute, and Ruth, a Moabitess, recognized the Lord as their God, and they both were accepted in the community of Israel and became Jesus’s ancestors (Matt. 1:5-6). In the time of Nehemiah, however, the resident aliens living in Jerusalem most likely weren’t worshiping the Lord.

According to Ezra 9–10, many of the Israelites had taken pagan wives for themselves, which was in direct opposition to God’s commands (Deut. 7:1-5). Nehemiah reminded the people in chapter 13 that King Solomon “was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel, yet foreign women drew him into sin” (Neh. 13:26). More than likely these pagan women worshiped their own gods and taught their children to do the same. So in Nehemiah 9, to demonstrate full repentance from their sins, the Jews likely were separating themselves from any foreigner (not just wives) who didn’t exclusively worship God.

LEADER NOTE: The Israelites lived under the old covenant and meant to separate themselves from surrounding nations so that they would be a chosen nation to God (Ex. 19:5-6). Nehemiah's concern was that intermarrying with women who worshiped false gods would only cause a repeat of the sins that led to the exile in the first place (Deut. 29:26-28). Today, Christians live under the new covenant sealed in Christ's blood. We are cautioned against becoming unequally yoked with unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14-7:1), but while we wait for the Lord to return, we should make every effort to reach those outside the faith with the gospel (Matt. 5:16; 2 Tim. 2:24-26). With the help of the Holy Spirit, we seek the salvation of the lost around us without becoming an accomplice to sin (1 Cor. 5:9-13).

The Israelites confessed both their own sins and those of their ancestors despite God's undeserved goodness (Neh. 9:6-38). They recognized the corporate responsibility of sin and its generational impact. This confession led them naturally to worship as a community.

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.

LEADER NOTE: Sometimes walking faithfully with the Lord means recognizing and confessing sins of previous generations. Though we may not have personally carried out those sins, we may bear the natural consequences (Ex. 34:5-7). Part of walking with the Lord includes acknowledging past unfaithfulness. To ignore or attempt to justify past sins, especially those committed against others, is hard-hearted and self-serving and does not reflect the heart of Christ.

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).

Highlight the words related to worship and celebration.

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.

Between chapters 9 and 12, the people collectively renew their covenant with God, committing to following the law given to the Israelites by Moses nearly one thousand years prior. In this passage, the now-complete wall around Jerusalem is dedicated by God's people from across Judea (12:28-29). The wall's dedication attributed the work to God because the completed wall was a picture of God's faithfulness to His promises, as it fulfilled prophecies from Isaiah 44:28 and 45:13.

The temple, the wall, the city, and God's people had been restored and reconciled, and so the people celebrated. Calling for the Levites to lead in their joy musically, the people celebrated with thanksgiving and singing. And they gathered singers from all around, a great choir concert for the Lord acknowledging His faithful goodness and work.

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.

LEADER NOTE: The rest of chapter 12 describes the celebration and dedication ceremony itself as two choirs walking in procession around different halves of the city to meet at the temple. God had given them great joy (Neh. 12:43), and the reasons were because they were now protected from enemies with their wall rebuilt and because they were able to finish a great task with unity.¹

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

In verse 30, by purifying themselves and the people, the Levites kept God's purity laws (Lev. 11–15), which allowed the Israelites to approach God in worship. We often struggle to reconcile these purity laws, which seem legalistic, with what we know to be true about God's grace, but many scholars agree that these laws protected the health of the individual and the community.

LEADER NOTE: For God's people, being ritually unclean, or impure, wasn't a permanent condition. Sometimes it was brought about by certain actions (for example, eating certain foods or sexual intercourse) that were not sinful but made a person temporarily unsuitable for public worship of the Lord.

Certain purification laws in Leviticus included washing, isolation, or waiting periods. Others required one to bring a sacrifice to be offered by a priest on their behalf. Christ's sinless life and crucifixion served as the final, permanent sacrifice to atone for our sins and make us pure before God (Heb. 9:11–10:18). We no longer have to follow the purification laws to come before God—all that's required of us is faith in Christ.

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

VOICES FROM CHURCH HISTORY

x

x

"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."²

—Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892)

ARRIVAL

ENGAGE: Write on a board the heading “Movies/TV Shows/Books About Reconciliation.” As adults arrive, give them a marker and direct them to record any movies, TV shows, and/or books in which reconciliation is a major theme (ex., *Coco*; *Remember the Titans*; *Les Misérables*). Review their answers, asking for clarification regarding the plots you may not be familiar with.

TRANSITION: The need for reconciliation is a common human experience because we make mistakes and damage our relationships. In today’s study, we will look at the role of reconciliation in our walk with God and how it plays out in our lives.

CONTEXT

SUMMARIZE: Review the previous sessions, recalling that the Babylonians defeated the nation of Judah, carried away the exiles, and assimilated them into Babylonian culture. Highlight the story of the returnees who rebuilt the temple that had been left in ruins when the Babylonian army destroyed the city. Then summarize Nehemiah’s return to the city and his role in rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem. Point out that the Jewish people repented of their sin as they heard Ezra read from the book of the Law, and they turned back to worshipping the Lord.

RECAP

ASK: What verse, question, or concept stood out to you as you prepared this week?

REVIEW: In our personal preparation this week, we learned the important role of confession in the Jewish people’s personal and corporate relationship with God. Individuals across the nation fasted and showed repentance by wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads. We also learned how the priests and Levites purified themselves and the people, and we saw them celebrate the work that God has done in their lives and their city.

TRANSITION: Now let’s dig a little deeper to explore how the people demonstrated repentance and reconciliation through confession, purification, and worship.



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GROUP ACTIVITY

CHART: Refer adults to page 110 in the Personal Study Guide (PSG), where they will find a chart titled “Reconciliation for Fellowship.” Recreate this chart on a board in your room so you can record the group’s responses as they examine the Scripture. Leave empty the parentheses in the first column; the group will fill those in as part of the activity.

Reconciliation for Fellowship

Read Nehemiah 9:1-3; 12:27-30 and the verses in James below. Fill in the verses and define each step of reconciliation with God in your own words.

ISRAELITES Nehemiah 9; 12	BELIEVERS James	DEFINITION
REPENTANT SORROW (9:1)	(4:9-10)	
PURIFICATION (9:2)	(1:21; 4:1,8)	
CONFESSION (9:2)	(5:16)	
SCRIPTURE (9:3)	(1:21)	
CELEBRATION (12:27)	(1:2-3)	
THANKSGIVING (12:27)	(1:17)	
SINGING (12:28)	(5:13)	

READ: Enlist two volunteers, one to read Nehemiah 9:1-3 and the other to read Nehemiah 12:27-30.

INSTRUCT: Direct teams of 2 or 3 to jot down the verse numbers from today’s passages that correspond to how the Israelites reflected the various steps of reconciliation in the chart. *(Note that the verse numbers are given in your leader guide chart but not in the PSG.)* After a moment, encourage the groups to call out their findings, recording these on the chart on the board.

COMPARE: As you turn to the book of James, inform the group that the apostle James, the half-brother of Jesus, wrote these words to Jewish Christians to show them how to live out their faith actively and practically. Instruct the teams to look up the verses in James and to use the verses in both Nehemiah and James to define in their own words each step of reconciliation.

DIRECT: Point out that believers today are permanently reconciled with God in our standing relationships with Him because of Jesus’s work on the cross. Ask:

Notes

“Even though we are reconciled with God through Christ’s work, why do we need to return to these steps regularly?” (*We still need to confess and repent on a daily basis when we sin, striving to live lives of holiness, to maintain fellowship and intimacy with God.*) Remind the group that though we don’t have to do all these steps to be reconciled and they are not necessarily in a certain order, this list shows us how our hearts can be tender to God after sin.

DEBRIEF

Which of these steps are easy for you to do, and why? Which are difficult, and why?

SUMMARIZE

In the stories of both Ezra and Nehemiah, confession, purification, and worship were all evidence of the people turning away from their sinful actions (repentance) and turning toward God (reconciliation). The need to turn back to God and follow Jesus in faith is a theme running through the entire New Testament. God’s desire has always been for His creation to draw near to Him and receive His mercy, grace, and forgiveness.

HEAD, HEART, HANDS

Walk the group through the Head, Heart, Hands section in the PSG (p. 111). If running short on time, specifically highlight the **Heart** section in this week’s study, inviting volunteers to share their responses to the question in this section.



HEAD: The Israelites’ prayer of confession and praise can be found in Nehemiah 9:6-38. Confession, both to God and to fellow believers, is modeled and commanded throughout Scripture (Lev. 5:5; 2 Sam. 12:13; Jas. 5:16; 1 John 1:9). Genuine confession brings repentance, humility, and praise for the God who holds the power to cleanse us from our sins (Ps. 103:12).

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



HEART: The Israelites acknowledged their wickedness and that of their fathers. Like us, they may have been uncomfortable voicing these transgressions and tempted to justify themselves in their hearts. But they had seen the faithfulness of God in both His punishments and His blessings, and they trusted that He would draw them back to Himself.

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



HANDS: Our prayers can sometimes focus on asking God for things and little else. There are many examples of prayer in Scripture (1 Kings 8:23-53; Luke 1:46-55; Matt. 6:9-13), and they generally involve four things: adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication—ACTS for short. As the body of

Christ, we're also told to confess sins to one another (Jas. 5:16). This doesn't mean telling everyone you know all you've ever done but identifying mature believers who can gracefully hold you accountable in your walk with the Lord.

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

NEXT STEPS

Challenge the group to consider these actions as responses to this week's session.

- Read 1 John 1:9 and reflect on the promise it offers. Ask God to show you any sins you need to confess to Him and thank Him for His faithfulness to forgive your sin and cleanse you from all unrighteousness. Think of things you might need to get rid of to keep yourself pure and holy.
- If you are struggling with habitual sin, consider talking with a trusted friend or pastor about this stronghold.
- Spend time in personal worship, praising God for His character and His steadfast lovingkindness. Think of ways you can celebrate and thank God for all He's done.

Invite volunteers to share prayer needs for this week. Encourage them to record these in the space on page 111 in their PSG so they can pray for others throughout the week.

PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES

PRAYING SCRIPTURE

CLOSE: Pray through Psalm 40:1-3 with your group, focusing on thanking Christ for hearing our cry and reconciling us to the Father. Then pray through verses 9-10, asking God for opportunities to boldly proclaim God's faithfulness and salvation both in the church and to the world.

References

1. F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), 257–58.)
2. C. H. Spurgeon, "Faith Purifying the Heart," in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 23 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1877), 221.

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.

As you examine Malachi 3:1-6; 4:1-6:

- Recognize that God's unchanging qualities include His faithfulness to His promises and covenants.
- Consider how the fire of purification for God's people will also bring the destruction of the wicked.



TIMELINE

SESSION STUDY: Malachi
Prophesies the Coming
Messiah and the Day of
the Lord (Malachi 3–4)

Nehemiah Returns and Rebuilds
 the Wall Around Jerusalem
 (Nehemiah 1–6)

Nehemiah Is Zealous for the
 Sabbath (Nehemiah 13)

Ezra the Priest Returns to Judah
 and Instructs the People in the Law
 (Ezra 7–10)

Ezra Reads the Book of the Law
 and the People Confess Their Sin
 (Nehemiah 8–12)

The Intertestamental
 Period

Daily Readings

- | | |
|--|--|
| <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 |



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

A DAY IS COMING WHEN GOD WILL PURIFY HIS PEOPLE (MALACHI 3:1-6).

Underline all the future-tense verbs (actions beginning with “will”) and note who is performing the actions.

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.”

In Malachi 2, God rebuked the Israelites and their priests for their skewed view of justice and their complacent behavior toward worship. Chapter 3 begins with the Lord’s response to them, showing them what true justice will look like. The Lord rebuked the people for bringing inappropriate sacrifices (ch. 1), but they would be able to offer acceptable sacrifices again when the Messenger purified and reoriented their hearts to obedience.

LEADER NOTE: Two messengers are referenced in Malachi 3–4, though not every translation differentiates them with a lowercase and uppercase “M.” The Hebrew root word for messenger (*malak*) is the same in both, but they are distinct words. The first usage is *malaki* (“my messenger”), while the second usage is *umalak* (“the messenger”). Notice that the first messenger is described as the Lord’s (“my”) messenger to prepare the way before Him (“before me”), who is “the LORD” and “the Messenger of the covenant” (v. 1).

In fulfillment of Malachi 3:1, John the Baptist would be the lowercase “messenger” who prepares the way for “the LORD,” the uppercase “Messenger,” Jesus Christ. Using metaphors of a refiner’s fire and strong launderer’s soap, the Messenger will purify the people so that they will “present offerings to the LORD in righteousness” (v. 3), not in apathy and corruption as they were doing. The “day of his coming” (v. 2) refers to the Day of the Lord, Christ’s second coming. When He returns, final purification will come for God’s people.

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.

LEADER NOTE: Based on the Hebrew sentence structure, “the Messenger of the covenant you delight in” most likely means they delight in the Messenger, not the covenant itself (the Hebrew word for “delight” means to take pleasure in, expressing a deep desire for). The Messiah had been foretold many times at this point, and the Israelites delighted in (longed for) His coming. Then why these rebukes from God? The Israelites assumed the Lord’s coming would be good news for them simply because they were the Lord’s chosen people, regardless of their sins or spiritual apathy.

How can you avoid falling into apathy toward God?

God calls His people to heart change, not just passive obedience (Ezek. 20:40; Rom. 12:1-2; 1 Pet. 2:5), and by His Spirit, He enables that heart change. Our good intentions aren’t enough; our lives must reflect God’s character.

How often we forget the power and might of the Lord! The Israelites forgot this as well, continuing to sin even after returning from exile, recognizing the Lord’s faithfulness, and renewing their covenant with Him. Sadly, this is the human condition; despite our best intentions, we still sin.

One day, Jesus will return and bring judgment to those who did not believe in His name and did not fear Him. But those who trust in the Lord will be saved. God allowed the Israelites to continue living in the land because of His character (Ex. 34:5-6). It had nothing to do with them and everything to do with His covenant promises. In the same way, God’s new covenant promises assure us of salvation because God never changes. His love, grace, and mercy are always available to His people.

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).

Circle all the imagery words that symbolize something else.

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 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.”

Malachi concluded his book with a summary of his main points. On the Day of the Lord, the faithful will be purified and saved, while the wicked will be destroyed (4:1-3). The arrogant and wicked are those who don’t trust in or fear the Lord, even among those who claim God’s name (3:16)! The Lord will remain faithful to His covenant promises, both in blessing and cursing (4:4-6).

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.

The “day” referred to here is again the day of Jesus’s second coming, although the Israelites didn’t realize that yet. On this coming day, two things will happen: A burning fire, like the one referenced in the previous passage (3:2-3), will (1) destroy the wicked, burning them to ashes, leaving no root or branches to regrow or produce fruit, and (2) purify and heal those who fear God’s name, those who trust in Jesus as Lord.

LEADER NOTE: The image of “the sun of righteousness” isn’t a play on the word “Son,” implying Christ, but is descriptive imagery that points to Christ. Light is often used in Scripture to portray righteousness, or spiritual goodness, faithfulness, and holiness (Ps. 84:11; Isa. 30:26; Hos. 6:3; John 1:4-5). “Wings” is poetic language for the sun’s rays. The rising sun of righteousness will cause the people of God great joy, “playfully jump[ing] like calves from the stall.” In Revelation 22:16, Jesus reveals Himself as “the bright morning star.” Further, in the restored heavens and earth, we will no longer need the sun because Christ’s glory will be our light (22:5).

The wicked will already be ashes when they’re trampled by God’s people. This is the Lord’s doing, not ours (Mal. 4:3). God is always the Judge, not us. By His grace, then, we will one day trample those ashes if we fear Him.

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

The people were then commanded to remember “the instruction of Moses” (v. 4), God’s law, for that would show whether they feared His name or not. And in the future, God would send “the prophet Elijah” to call them to repentance (v. 5). Ultimately this meant God would send someone, His “messenger” (3:1), in the spirit of Elijah—John the Baptist, who would warn the people and call them to repent and believe in Jesus.

LEADER NOTE: In Luke 1:11-20, the angel Gabriel told Zechariah that his wife, Elizabeth, would have a son who would “turn many . . . to the Lord their God.” This son would go before the Messiah “in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers to their children . . . to make ready for the Lord a prepared people.” Jesus Himself confirmed that John the Baptist fulfilled this prophecy from Malachi (Matt. 11:10-14; 17:10-13).

The final verse in Malachi emphasizes the restoration and revival that will take place as people turn to the Lord because of this messenger. Fathers will care for their children and children will care for their fathers, representing a lack of selfishness among humanity. But a stark warning ends the book for those who continue to live in wickedness: God will come and punish them, and curses will ensue (cf. Deut. 28:15-68).

What would a spiritual revival look like for you today?

ARRIVAL

INTERACT: As adults arrive, ask: “What day or dates are you looking forward to in the coming weeks or months?” As they respond, inquire about why those dates are significant to them. Then ask: “What days or dates are you not looking forward to?” Allow them to explain why.

TRANSITION: Many of us today have great things we are looking forward to, but we must never forget that a day is coming that will surpass every other day—Christ’s return! Old Testament Scripture often called this the Day of the Lord.

CONTEXT

SAY: Nehemiah and his fellow Jews rebuilt the wall around Jerusalem, and with the wall complete, the people sought to renew their relationship with God. As Ezra read the Law and the Levites explained it, the people repented of their sin and returned to worshiping the Lord. We know, however, that Malachi was a contemporary of Nehemiah and Ezra, and his message to the people showed they had grown lax in their worship of the Lord. So he gave them something to set their minds on: a warning and a hope.

RECAP

ASK: In your personal preparation this week, what stood out to you as significant or impactful?

SAY: During the week, we learned that a day is coming when God will purify His people. We read Malachi’s prophecy of John the Baptist as a forerunner of the coming Messiah, Jesus. Through Christ’s death, we are purified into right standing before God, yet we are also being sanctified until Christ’s return, when that sanctification will be complete. On that final day, God will also destroy the wicked.

TRANSITION: Malachi wrote about a time in the future called the Day of the Lord. As followers of Jesus, that is a day we can look forward to, not because of anything we have done but because of what Christ has done for us.



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Notes



SUMMARIZE: Many prophets in the Old Testament talked about the Day of the Lord like Malachi did, including Isaiah, Joel, Amos, Zephaniah, and others. They understood it as a time when God’s faithful people would be delivered and God’s enemies would be destroyed. (*Display Pack Item 13: The Sun of Righteousness.*) When Jesus, the promised Messenger of the covenant and the Messiah, came the first time, His blood and sacrifice made us believers righteous before God, so those who trust in Christ need not fear the Day of the Lord as we are already part of His family. But our hearts should be compassionate toward those who have not yet trusted in Him, pleading with them to repent and believe in Jesus before “the great and terrible day of the LORD comes” (Mal. 4:5).

DEBRIEF

How should believers today respond to Malachi 3:1-6 and 4:1-6?

SUMMARIZE

A day is coming when God will purify His people and destroy evil. It should be a day believers look forward to and wait for in alert anticipation. In the meantime, let us be intentional about living like Christ in holiness and sharing His gospel that all may enjoy the hope we have.

HEAD, HEART, HANDS

Walk the group through the Head, Heart, Hands section in the PSG (p. 119). If running short on time, specifically highlight the **Head** section in this week’s study, inviting volunteers to share their responses to the question in this section.



HEAD: These passages in Malachi were divinely inspired by God and, in His sovereignty, preserved over two thousand years. To neglect the prophetic books and the Old Testament leaves our understanding of the New Testament lacking. It can even lead to the belief that the God of the Old Testament is different than the God of the New Testament (a long-standing heresy called Marcionism). Though we may not live under the old covenant anymore, all of Scripture points to Christ as the hope, joy, and redemption for humankind and the world.

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



HEART: The Israelites knew the Lord and His commands. Yet even after their covenant renewal, they continued to sin, not by worshiping other gods but by resenting the worship of God. The Lord warned that those who do not fear Him will be destroyed. For the Israelites, and us today, loyalty to self or earthly powers above loyalty to the entirety of God’s Word says a lot about how we understand His character and how seriously we take His Word.

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



HANDS: We should find hope in the Lord's future return, but we can't rejoice in the coming destruction of the wicked without first looking at our own lives. Scripture has much to say about hypocrisy. Jesus commands us to deal with our own sins before pointing out those of others (Luke 6:42), and He was executed by the self-righteous, not by the socially "impure." It's possible to say we believe in God with our lips but to practically live as if we don't know Him.

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

NEXT STEPS

Challenge the group to consider these actions as responses to this week's session.

- Read 1 Thessalonians 5:1-6 and compare it to Malachi's prophecies. How is this passage similar to or different than Malachi's message?
- If you are experiencing anxiety regarding the Day of the Lord, talk to your pastor, Bible study leader, or a friend.
- Reflect on what your friends and family members believe will happen to them when they die or when the world ends. Ask God for opportunities to share the gospel so you can offer them hope for the future.

Invite volunteers to share prayer needs for this week. Encourage them to record these in the space on page 119 in their PSG so they can pray for others throughout the week.

PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES

PRAYING SCRIPTURE

CLOSE: Pray through Psalm 66:5-12 with your group, thanking God for His wonders and how He refines us, making us pure. Praise Him as you wait for His return.



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.

As you examine Luke 1:5-17:

- Recognize how God's miracle of giving Zechariah and Elizabeth a son recalls similar miracles in the Old Testament.
- Consider how their son, John, fulfilled God's promise to send someone in the spirit and power of Elijah to prepare the way for Jesus.



TIMELINE

Malachi Prophesies the Messenger to Prepare the Way for the Lord (Malachi 3-4)

Nehemiah Returns and Rebuilds the Wall Around Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1-6)

The Intertestamental Period

Ezra the Priest Returns to Judah and Instructs the People in the Law (Ezra 7-10)

Ezra Reads the Book of the Law and the People Confess Their Sin (Nehemiah 8-12)

SESSION STUDY: An Angel Foretells the Birth of John the Baptist, Who Prepares the Way for the Messiah (Luke 1)

Daily Readings

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 1: Luke 1:1-4 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 4: Luke 1:39-56 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 2: Luke 1:5-25 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 5: Luke 1:57-80 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Day 3: Luke 1:26-38 | <input type="checkbox"/> Day 6: Psalm 65 |



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

GOD PREPARED THE WAY THROUGH THE PROVISION OF A SON (LUKE 1:5-13).

Highlight the description of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Underline the message the angel gave Zechariah.

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."

Luke starts off his Gospel telling Theophilus that he is writing "so that you may know the certainty of the things about which you have been instructed" (1:4). And with that, he started with the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, a priest and his wife, who also was from a priestly line. Both lived righteously before God, yet they had no children as Elizabeth was barren and they were both older. Luke was setting up the story knowing that this narrative would fulfill prophecy.

In verse 9, Zechariah was chosen by lot for a priestly responsibility. It may seem that this was all happening by luck or chance, but God's providence was truly at work, for in that one moment of Zechariah burning incense in the sanctuary, God sent an angel to him with a message.

LEADER NOTE: During this time, there were so many priests that within the twenty-four divisions that would serve twice a year, the priests who would serve needed to be chosen by lot (Luke 1:9). Zechariah's appointment to bring the incense to the altar was a once-in-a-lifetime moment, and it was not a coincidence that God chose that moment to answer not only Zechariah's prayer for a son (v. 13) but His people's prayer for the Messiah. Zechariah's son would not be the Messiah but the forerunner who would come in the spirit of Elijah to prepare the way for Jesus (v. 17; cf. Mal. 4:5-6).

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

Notes

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.

Like anyone would be, Zechariah was “terrified and overcome with fear” (v. 12). God had been silent for over four hundred years, and here an angel of the Lord appeared to him. The angel’s message, however, was one of encouragement, telling Zechariah, “Do not be afraid,” because his prayer had been heard, and his wife would bear them a son (v. 13).

But note that God didn’t give Zechariah and Elizabeth a child to reward their “good behavior”; this wasn’t a reward for their blamelessness. He chose them to participate in His plan of redemption. By withholding a child until His chosen time, God defied society’s belief that to be barren meant there was some underlying sin in a woman’s past. God looks on barrenness throughout Scripture with gentleness and care, especially in the face of societal shame. In cases like Sarah (Gen. 12; 17; 21; Heb. 11:11), Rebekah (Gen. 25:21), Rachel (Gen. 29:31; 30:1), Hannah (1 Sam. 1), and Elizabeth, God didn’t give children to elevate these women in society’s eyes but to demonstrate His ability to accomplish His covenant promises.

LEADER NOTE: Many godly couples struggle with infertility. If infertility or recurrent miscarriage never results in children, God will still redeem the years of longing in His perfect way, even if the redemption doesn’t occur this side of heaven. In this fallen world, infertility and miscarriage for many couples may be similar to the thorn in the flesh Paul prayed for God to remove, but God’s grace is sufficient in all of our weaknesses (2 Cor. 12:7-10). Despite the struggles we face, we must reorient our understanding of God’s love and redemptive plan.

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).

Circle each future-tense verb in the passage.

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 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.”

John’s birth, prayed and longed for by Zechariah and Elizabeth, was also joyful for the many who prayed and longed for the deliverance of God’s people. Finally, here was the messenger to the Messenger, foretold four hundred years earlier by the prophet Malachi.

The Greek word for “great” in verse 15 indicates power, authority, or significance. John would be great in the Lord’s sight because of the divine power on his life and the divine purpose for which he was chosen (cf. Jer. 1:5). Abstaining from wine and beer would be an outward sign of this purpose.

LEADER NOTE: It was possible that John would live as a Nazirite (Num. 6:1-3), like Samson (Judg. 13:4-5) and Samuel (1 Sam. 1:11). Nazirites devoted their lives to holiness beyond the general guidelines of the law, typically for a certain service. They took a vow when entering this lifestyle, which was typically marked by certain outward actions, like abstaining from strong drink and unclean foods and not cutting their hair throughout the time of their vow.

Previously, God had ordained other prophets before they were born (Isa. 49:1,5; Jer. 1:5), but Zechariah’s child would be filled with the Holy Spirit even before birth. Pentecost had not happened occurred, so the Holy Spirit didn’t dwell in every person who trusted in the Lord. After hundreds of years without any revelation from the Lord, God would give John His Spirit so that no one could ignore the calling on John the Baptist’s life.

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

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).

Luke 1:16-17 recalls Malachi 3:1 and 4:5-6, which speak of the “delight” of the people and the messenger coming like “Elijah” to “turn the hearts of fathers to their children.” The passage also recalls Isaiah 40:3, which foretells a voice of one crying out to prepare the way of the Lord. As a priest, Zechariah would have been familiar with the Old Testament and its prophecies, so the significance of Gabriel’s words here wouldn’t have been lost on him. He would know that the angel was talking about a messenger who was preparing the way for the Messenger, the Messiah.

Even recognizing this prophecy, Zechariah struggled to believe God’s power to give him a son. As a result, the angel made him unable to speak until these things happened (Luke 1:18-20). Later, when Zechariah believed and named his son John, he was able to speak again, and then he prophesied by the Holy Spirit and praised God for His faithfulness (vv. 59-79).

LEADER NOTE: We often forget the people in the Bible were human like we are, so we might have a tendency to look down on them for their doubt. In Zechariah and Elizabeth’s case, we may overlook the significance of their faith. Despite God’s four-hundred-year silence, they remained faithful to His covenant. At the right time, God chose to bless them with a son, and their son would bring joy to many as he heralded the Messiah, fulfilling Old Testament prophecy.

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



Notes

ARRIVAL

INTERACT: As adults arrive, invite them to share how they get ready when a friend or family member is coming to stay in their home. Encourage them to think about shopping, cleaning, and other tasks associated with an upcoming arrival.

TRANSITION: With special events and special people, planning is needed. We want all things to be ready. God too will prepare in advance for events He has in store. He had been preparing His people for a long time for the coming of the Messiah, the Savior. But would they be ready?

CONTEXT

SAY: Pass out copies of **Pack Item 14: Time Between the Testaments** and briefly remind your group of Malachi's message. Say: "In the past weeks, we followed the Jewish people as they returned from Babylonian exile. With the rebuilding of the temple and the city wall, the people repented of their sin and vowed to worship the Lord. The prophet Malachi, the last Old Testament prophet, foretold a time when God would judge wickedness and bring healing to His righteous ones. He also stated that a future messenger would prepare people's hearts to turn to the Messiah in repentance and faith. This week we pass over four hundred years of God's silence in the biblical storyline as we transition to the New Testament, where Luke began his Gospel with a narrative fulfilling Malachi's prophecy."

RECAP

ASK: What did you glean from the Bible passage in your personal preparation this week?

SAY: This week in our personal preparation, we learned about a couple whom God blessed with a son, later known as John the Baptist. He would be the forerunner to the coming Messiah, Jesus. John was filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother's womb, and we learned about the role he would play in calling people to repentance.

TRANSITION: We talked about the preparations we make when a friend, family member, or loved one comes to visit. Let's turn our attention to how God makes preparations.

TIME BETWEEN THE TESTAMENTS	
DATE	SYNOPSIS
400 BC	Malachi prophesied that God would send a messenger to prepare the way for the Lord. This messenger would be John the Baptist, who would prepare the way for Jesus Christ.
300 BC	The Jews returned from Babylonian exile and rebuilt the temple and the city wall. They repented of their sin and vowed to worship the Lord.
200 BC	The Jews were still in Babylonian exile. They were still in Babylonian exile. They were still in Babylonian exile.
100 BC	The Jews were still in Babylonian exile. They were still in Babylonian exile. They were still in Babylonian exile.
0 BC	The Jews were still in Babylonian exile. They were still in Babylonian exile. They were still in Babylonian exile.
AD 30	Jesus Christ was crucified and died for the sins of the world.
AD 33	Jesus Christ rose from the dead and ascended into heaven.
AD 40	The Holy Spirit came upon the apostles and they began to preach the Gospel.
AD 50	The apostles began to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles.
AD 70	The Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed.
AD 100	The Jews were still in Babylonian exile. They were still in Babylonian exile. They were still in Babylonian exile.
AD 150	The Jews were still in Babylonian exile. They were still in Babylonian exile. They were still in Babylonian exile.
AD 200	The Jews were still in Babylonian exile. They were still in Babylonian exile. They were still in Babylonian exile.
AD 300	The Jews were still in Babylonian exile. They were still in Babylonian exile. They were still in Babylonian exile.
AD 400	The Jews were still in Babylonian exile. They were still in Babylonian exile. They were still in Babylonian exile.
AD 500	The Jews were still in Babylonian exile. They were still in Babylonian exile. They were still in Babylonian exile.
AD 600	The Jews were still in Babylonian exile. They were still in Babylonian exile. They were still in Babylonian exile.
AD 700	The Jews were still in Babylonian exile. They were still in Babylonian exile. They were still in Babylonian exile.
AD 800	The Jews were still in Babylonian exile. They were still in Babylonian exile. They were still in Babylonian exile.
AD 900	The Jews were still in Babylonian exile. They were still in Babylonian exile. They were still in Babylonian exile.
AD 1000	The Jews were still in Babylonian exile. They were still in Babylonian exile. They were still in Babylonian exile.



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GROUP ACTIVITY

CHART: Direct the group to page 126 in their Personal Study Guide (PSG), where they will find a chart titled “Prepare the Way.” Recreate this chart on a board so you can record the group’s findings as they interact with the Scripture text.

Prepare the Way Research how the New Testament describes some of God’s preparations.	
VERSES	SUMMARY
Romans 9:22-24	
2 Corinthians 5:5	
Ephesians 2:10	
Hebrews 11:16	
Revelation 21:1-2	

READ: Call on a volunteer to read Luke 1:5-17.

ASK: How did God prepare Zechariah and Elizabeth for their coming son? How did God prepare the Jews for the coming Messiah?

SAY: God had prepared His people throughout the Old Testament by sending messengers—leaders, judges, kings, prophets, and priests—to turn God’s people’s hearts toward Him. He always had a plan to redeem and save His people, even in their sin, and this salvation was all for His glory. He has been preparing a way for us and His preparations are always good.

INSTRUCT: Form five groups (a single person can be a group, if needed) and assign each group one of the passages on the chart. Instruct them to read the verse or verses (and surrounding verses, if needed) and to summarize what God is preparing or has prepared for us. (*Romans 9:22-24: God prepared the wicked for destruction and His people for glory; 2 Corinthians 5:5: God is preparing us for our heavenly bodies; Ephesians 2:10: God has prepared us for good works;*

Notes

Hebrews 11:16: God has prepared a city for us in heaven; Revelation 21:1-2: God has prepared a new heaven and earth for us.) Record this on the chart and encourage the group to record the information on the chart in their PSG.

DISCUSS: How do these preparations of God relate to the preparation work the angel foretold about John the Baptist?

DEBRIEF

Which preparation of God are you most thankful for?

How does it make you feel that God thinks you're special enough to prepare these things for you?

SUMMARIZE

Over the past few weeks, we've seen an underlying theme in God's desire to be reconciled to His people. In Ezra and Nehemiah, God called the people back to fidelity to Him. In Malachi, we heard a prophet's plea for people to return to the Lord before the day when He will destroy all evil. And today we learned about the miraculous gift of John, a man whose mission was to prepare the people for the Messiah, the One who would die to reconcile humanity to God.

HEAD, HEART, HANDS

Walk the group through the Head, Heart, Hands section in the PSG (p. 127). If running short on time, specifically highlight the **Hands** section in this week's study, inviting volunteers to share their responses to the question in this section.



HEAD: The encounter between Zechariah and the angel Gabriel carries huge theological significance. God didn't give John to Zechariah and Elizabeth to reward their righteousness. Because they were "without blame according to all the commands and requirements of the Lord" (Luke 1:6), God chose to include them in His plan for the world's redemption. Their faithfulness to the Lord bore fruit that would ultimately lead many people in Israel and the world to trust in Jesus.

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



HEART: Giving thanks to God is a theme woven throughout Scripture, especially in the Psalms and New Testament epistles. In the Old Testament, the Israelites gave a thanksgiving offering to show gratitude and worship to the God who gives us everything we need (Lev. 7:11-15). Unexpressed gratitude can lead to a sense of control and entitlement. When we mindfully thank God for the gifts He has given us, both the good things and the hard things, we acknowledge that He is constant, faithful, and merciful.

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



HANDS: God has been making preparations for His people for our greatest good and His greatest glory. He chose a people in Abraham; He chose David for the line that would lead to our Messiah-King. The Lord disciplined His people through exile and restored them again in His faithful mercy, all so His promises would remain true. He chose prophets to call His people to repentance and prepare them to receive His most precious gift—His Son. Through some of the passages in the epistles, we’ve seen God making preparations for us in a variety of ways. He has good things in store for His people because He has always been good and faithful. And now He works through us sharing the gospel to prepare and call yet more people into His reconciliation and restoration.

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

NEXT STEPS

Challenge the group to consider these actions as responses to this session.

- Reflect on John’s mission to call people to repent and turn to God. Is there any area of sin you need to confess to Him?
- Write a letter to God expressing your gratitude for His pursuing love for you. Also thank Him for those who were messengers in your life, telling you about His love and how to know Him personally.
- Pray for those in your sphere of influence—friends, family members, colleagues, teammates—who do not yet know Jesus as their Savior. Ask God for opportunities to demonstrate His love to them.

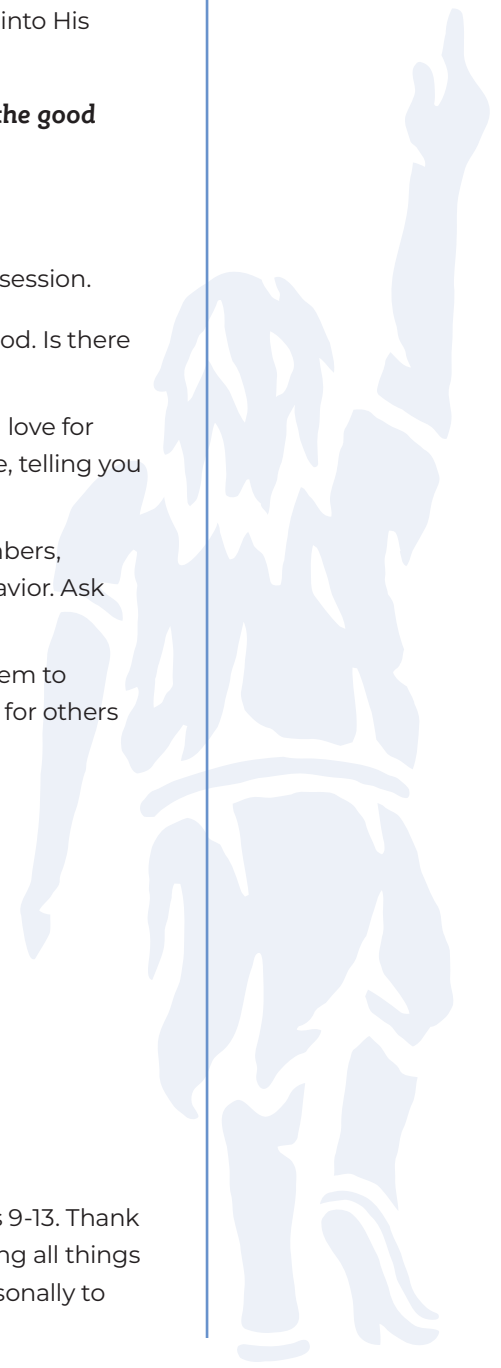
Invite volunteers to share prayer needs for this week. Encourage them to record these in the space on page 127 in their PSG so they can pray for others throughout the week.

PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES

PRAYING SCRIPTURE

CLOSE: Pray through Psalm 65 with your group, focusing on verses 9-13. Thank God that He always has a plan and knows what He’s doing, preparing all things for good. Thank Him that He has prepared a way for each of us personally to come to Jesus and know Him.

Notes



THE SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE

By Bob Bunn



On January 13, 1984, President Ronald Reagan issued a proclamation supporting what he dubbed “the sanctity of human life.” Pointing to the deaths of millions of unborn children through legalized abortion, Reagan noted that Americans were “poorer not simply for lives not led and for contributions not made, but also for the erosion of our sense of worth and dignity of every individual.”¹ In response, Reagan proclaimed Sunday, January 22 of that year—the 11th anniversary of the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion—“National Sanctity of Human Life Day.”

Today, many Christians recognize the importance of protecting the sanctity of human life. Not only is it a matter of life and death for unborn children, but it also underscores the larger truth that all human life is sacred—from the womb to the grave. In the article on “The Christian and Social Order,” the SBC also makes a broader appeal for the universal value of each human life, especially those who cannot defend themselves: “We should work to provide for the orphaned, the needy, the abused, the aged, the helpless, and the sick. We should speak on behalf of the unborn and contend for the sanctity of all human life from conception to natural death.”²

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS

“Sanctity” can be traced to the Latin word *sanctus*, or “sacred.” So by definition, the sanctity of human life considers every life “sacred” or “set apart” by God for His purposes and plans. That’s exactly what we see in the Scriptures.

Starting with Adam and Eve, human beings are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27). While theologians have debated the precise meaning

of the *imago dei* (“Image of God”), three things are certain. First, it is unique to humanity. No other aspect of the created order is said to be formed by God’s hand in God’s image. Second, the image of God is a universal trait of each human. All of us—even those who choose to reject God’s mercy and grace—bear His image. Finally, the image of God gives every human value and purpose. Our lives have meaning because we reflect Him.

In the Psalms, we see that the *imago dei* places humans “a little lower than God” and that we are crowned “with glory and honor” (8:5). The Lord has given us authority as His stewards to rule over His creation (vv. 6-8).

Plus, we are “remarkably and wondrously made” by the very hand of God (139:14). He “knit” (a word that implies protection and security in Hebrew³) us in our mother’s womb, and nothing in our lives is hidden from Him (vv. 13,15). This underscores our responsibility to view others through the lens of the sanctity of human life.

The sanctity of human life also emphasizes the purposes God has for each individual. Again, the psalmist noted that God knows the course of our days before they even begin (139:16). In addition, the prophet Jeremiah learned that God had set him apart from ministry before his birth (Jer. 1:5).

God, the Creator of the universe, knows each of us and has a plan for each of us. But the greatest proof that every human life has value can be found in what is arguably the most familiar verse in all of Scripture. John 3:16 states that God’s love for humanity drove Him to make the greatest sacrifice imaginable. He sent His Son to pay the price for our sin. Because Jesus died for humanity, we can affirm the sanctity of all human life.

The image of God is a universal trait of each human.
All of us—even those who choose to reject God’s mercy
and grace—bear His image.

WHAT IT MEANS

As noted, the momentum of Sanctity of Human Life Sunday began with a presidential proclamation regarding the unborn. It served as a clarion call to encourage believers to protect the most vulnerable members of society and to take a bold stand against the evils of abortion.

But if we believe God calls us to value and protect every person He has created, believers must consider expanding their definition of the sanctity of human life beyond the single issue of abortion.

In the Old Testament, God sent His people into exile for two primary reasons: idolatry and injustice. Today, we don’t have to look far to see how oppression of the helpless and hopeless continues to raise its ugly head. Some discount the value of the elderly, especially those who can no longer actively contribute to society. Racial strife, economic injustice, physical disabilities, and mental illness leave many on the fringes of society.

By and large, these are the people Jesus helped. While He kept the hypocritical religious elite at arm’s length, He socialized with the “sinners” as the Great Physician who offered the cure for their deepest needs. He was the rabbi who reached out and touched the lepers and other outcasts with a healing hand. He broke down cultural walls built around ethnic, gender, and social constraints.

Why? All so He could fulfill His messianic call articulated by Isaiah centuries earlier:

To heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and freedom to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of our God’s vengeance; to comfort all who mourn. (Isa. 61:1-2)

Jesus affirmed the sanctity of all human life through His words and actions. He reminds us, as C. S. Lewis stated: “There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal.”⁴ He challenges us to value every human life just as He does.

References

1. Ronald Reagan, “Proclamation 5147, National Sanctity of Human Life Day, 1984,” Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/proclamation-5147-national-sanctity-human-life-day-1984>.
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THE DISCIPLINE OF GIVING

By Rachel Myrick



During the Christmas season, Christians often give gifts generously to the people we love, claiming “it is better to give than to receive” (Acts 20:36). But the discipline of giving is not something we do only at Christmas and Easter. As Christians, we are called to give and live generously and sacrificially, blessing others from the resources that God has given to us.

GIVE WORSHIPFULLY

The first mention of the tithe, or tenth, occurred in Genesis 14. After Abram rescued his nephew, Lot, from Canaanite kings, a mysterious figure known as the king of Salem, Melchizedek, blessed him, and “Abram gave him a tenth of everything” (14:20). According to the book of Hebrews, Melchizedek was “without father, mother, or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever” (Heb. 7:3). Abram responded to Melchizedek’s blessing with worship. Jacob, after his encounter with God at Bethel, made a vow that if God would be with him, “I will give to you a tenth of all that you give me” (Gen. 28:22). At Mount Sinai, the tenth of crops, fruits, and animals were designated as tithes to the Lord (Lev. 27:30-32) for maintaining worship in the tabernacle/temple, celebrating holy feasts (Deut. 14:22-27), and caring for the needy (vv. 28-29).

When the people of Israel returned to Judah at Cyrus’s decree, the people gave freewill offerings for the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 1:6), as they had done when the first temple was built (1 Chron. 29:1-9). God moved the hearts of the people to resume the offerings and freewill offerings as well, giving whatever they felt led to give so that worship could resume (Ezra 3:5-7). After Ezra

read the Law to the people, they also pledged a vow to the Lord that they would resume the tithes of their produce and flocks so that they would “not neglect the house of our God” (Neh. 10:39). The prophet Malachi also encouraged them to remain faithful to regular tithes: “Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing me! . . . Bring the full tenth into the storehouse so that there may be food in my house” (Mal. 3:8-10). Giving back to God some of the resources that He gives to us shows that we desire Him above worldly riches and that we trust Him to provide for our every need.

GIVE CHEERFULLY

Though some modern Christians believe the tithe was only a requirement for Israel, believers in the New Testament gave offerings to further the ministry of the local church and to help those in need. Paul stated that the church should support the pastors and elders who share the gospel (1 Cor. 9:13-14). While many pastors today may be bi-vocational by choice or necessity, in Paul’s day, pastors and elders received offerings from the church (1 Tim. 5:17-18). New Testament believers also collected an offering to care for those in need.

While there is no command in the New Testament for a strict ten percent tithe, Paul said, “Each person should do as he has decided in his heart—not reluctantly or out of compulsion, since God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7). We do not give begrudgingly or because our salvation depends on it; rather, we know “God is able to make every grace overflow to you, so that in every way, always having everything you need, you may excel in every good work” (9:8). Since God supplies everything we need, we can be generous to others (Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Tim. 6:17-19).

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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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