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Editor's Note: The Special Session suggested for December 25 is a session with a Christmas focus. Depending on your schedule, you can consider this an optional session for your group. Some groups are not using this material by our suggested dates, and other groups may choose another option for the special session of Christmas. Whatever you choose to do with this session, communicate accordingly with your group members so they can be prepared for the correct session when you next meet.

FROM THE EDITOR



Andy McLean

Editor

*The Gospel Project
for Students*

Our journey through the Old Testament comes to an end with a look into Israel's exile to Babylon and their eventual return home. By picking up where we left off in the previous study with the fall of Jerusalem, we will retrace the steps of Israel's exile and the challenges and obstacles they faced even into the time of their journey home.

When we travel through the familiar stories that took place during this time period—stories like Daniel and the lions' den, or the furnace that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego faced, or even the risk-taking courage of Esther—we are quickly reminded that God is forever at work in His story of redemption. Even when things seem to be at their worst and God appears to be absent, these events and the lives of these characters remind us that He is there. He is always directing, orchestrating, and subtly working things out for His glory and the good of His people.

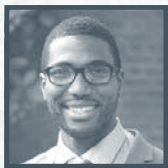
As we complete our time in the Old Testament, I encourage you to also consider this as you walk through the accounts from the people mentioned above: God has always been in the process of using young people in significant ways. Whether in the Bible itself or in the life of the church, history is filled with people who didn't wait until they were older to try to make much of God with their lives. And as we take a glimpse into how their lives were used within God's Story, I hope that you would be encouraged to make much of Christ in your own lives today (Heb. 13:7).

AUTHORS

UNIT 1



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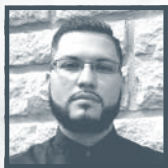
UNIT 2



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D. A. HORTON (session 11) currently serves as a pastor at Reach Fellowship, a church plant in Los Angeles, California. He is also working toward his PhD in Applied Theology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. He and his wife, Elicia, have three children, Izabelle, Lola, and D. A. Jr.



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HOW TO USE

▶ INTRO

The two introductory pages begin with a summary that provides a brief overview of the session, including a list of Scriptures. The main point is also listed here, as well as two introductory options to choose from to begin the session.

▶ HIS STORY

The five His Story pages contain the main teaching material for each session. This section follows the storyline of the Bible, focusing on what God has done in redemptive history throughout the pages of Scripture. The first page restates the main point that is to be emphasized throughout the session and is followed by an overview of the main characters. There is also an introductory plot that serves as a transitional entryway to the main part of the session that begins on the following page.

In addition to these, there are other things to notice throughout the His Story section:

- **Personal Study Guide:** Any time you see a vertical bar in the His Story section, it indicates that the material can also be found in the student's personal study guide.
- **Timeline:** Each session features a timeline of events that corresponds to the timeline located in the student's personal study guide.
- **Going Further With The Story:** Most sessions will include at least one of these. They contain additional material that allows leaders to go deeper into the biblical story. It is up to the leader's discretion whether he or she would like to utilize this material in any way. One can simply bypass this option, however, and not miss anything vital to the session.



01 SESSION ONE In a Foreign Land

THE POINT
Even in a hostile culture, Christians are called to remain true to their identity as God's chosen people.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1
On a poster board, write the word *integrity*, and then place the board at the front of the room where all the students can see it. Draw students' attention to the word *integrity*. Ask them what they think *integrity* means. After a few minutes of discussion, explain to students that *integrity* means an authentic, unified integrity or devotion to moral excellence. There is always a cost associated with integrity, whether we live according to how we want to live or how we are compensated and live our integrity out.

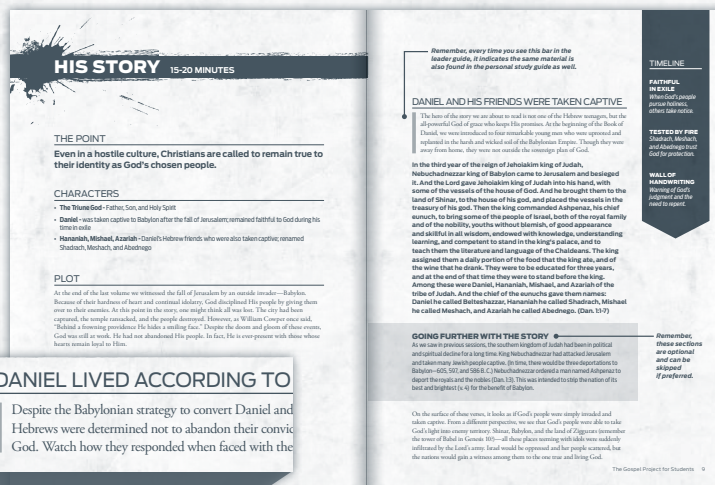
This weekend, your group of five or six will ask them to discuss how integrity applies to the following: actions, words, and relationships (family, friends, dating, etc.). Ask students to identify negative consequences that might arise from not living with integrity in each of these areas. Then, ask them to explain what it would look like for them to maintain integrity in their actions, words, and relationships. Give a brief time for this activity, then have the group break together to discuss what students came up with.

- How does your commitment to God affect your actions, words, and relationships?
- In what ways do you think God could help you stand firm in your beliefs?
- Daniel and his friends stood together in obedience to the Lord. Who do you know that would stand alongside you as you seek to obey God with your life?

Option 2
Put students in pairs to read the government license of a family across from God (Dan. 1:30), and Daniel also confirmed that only God can choose who will be in charge of the kingdom of the earth (2:31). However, Daniel disobeyed the king's wishes by not eating the food the king provided (2:8). Some might get an amazing image of Daniel for this action, but Daniel's obedience to God came before his obedience to the king, and the king was not willing to acknowledge it. When he disobeyed God, he became an unrecognizable God-fearer and not obedient to Him in any way. When he disobeyed God, he lost his authority over us as an unrecognizable, illegitimate, unacknowledged, and unrecognizable ruler. We must recognize that we are not the ruler and we must remain respectful to those authorities as Daniel and his friends did.

- What are some instances in which disobedience to governing authorities would be acceptable or even encouraged?
- Discuss some honorable ways and dishonorable ways to disobey in these situations.

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HIS STORY 15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT
Even in a hostile culture, Christians are called to remain true to their identity as God's chosen people.

CHARACTERS

- **The Three Kids:** Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego
- **Daniel:** was taken captive to Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem; remained faithful to God during his time in exile.
- **Harananish, Meshach, Azariath:** Daniel's Hebrew friends who were also taken captive; renamed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

PLOT

At the end of the last volume we witnessed the fall of Jerusalem by an outside invader—Babylon. Because of this Babylon had been and continued taking God's people into captivity. The king of the Babylonians had taken them away from God's land. At the point in the story, one might think all was lost. The city had been captured, the temple destroyed, and the people dispersed. However, as William W. Wiersbe said, "Babylon's towering pride has led to a falling. Despite the doom and gloom of these events, God was still at work. He had not abandoned His people. In fact, He is ever present with those who have chosen to follow Him."

Remember, every time you see this bar in the leader guide, it indicates the same material is also found in the personal study guide as well.

DANIEL AND HIS FRIENDS WERE TAKEN CAPTIVE

The hero of the story was to be shown to us in the first chapter of the book of Daniel. He was a young man who was captured and taken away from his home and his people. He was taken to Babylon, the city of the king of the Babylonians. He was taken to Babylon because of the fall of Jerusalem. He was taken to Babylon because of the fall of Jerusalem. He was taken to Babylon because of the fall of Jerusalem.

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

As an introduction to this session, the king of the Babylonians had captured Daniel and his friends. They were taken to Babylon, the city of the king of the Babylonians. They were taken to Babylon because of the fall of Jerusalem. They were taken to Babylon because of the fall of Jerusalem. They were taken to Babylon because of the fall of Jerusalem.

Remember, these are optional and can be skipped if preferred.

WALL OF KNOWING
What are some instances in which disobedience to governing authorities would be acceptable or even encouraged?

THE JOURNEY HOME
How do you think Daniel and his friends would have felt about their journey home?

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DANIEL LIVED ACCORDING TO GOD

Despite the Babylonian strategy to convert Daniel and his Hebrew friends were determined not to abandon their convictions. God. Watch how they responded when faced with the

Remember, every time you see this bar in the leader guide, it indicates the same material is also found in the personal study guide as well.

DANIEL LIVED ACCORDING TO HIS BELIEFS

Despite the Babylonian strategy to convert Daniel and his Hebrew friends were determined not to abandon their convictions. God. Watch how they responded when faced with the

Remember, these are optional and can be skipped if preferred.

WALL OF KNOWING
What are some instances in which disobedience to governing authorities would be acceptable or even encouraged?

THE JOURNEY HOME
How do you think Daniel and his friends would have felt about their journey home?

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THIS STUDY

- **Essential Doctrines:** Each session will also contain an essential doctrine that directly relates to the Bible study material. The essential doctrine is also located in the student's personal study guide, though in an abbreviated format.
- **Christ Connection:** Each session will end with a direct look at how the content studied connects with Christ, emphasizing to students how all of Scripture is pointing to Him. The material in the Christ Connection will also be provided in the student's personal study guide.

▶ YOUR STORY

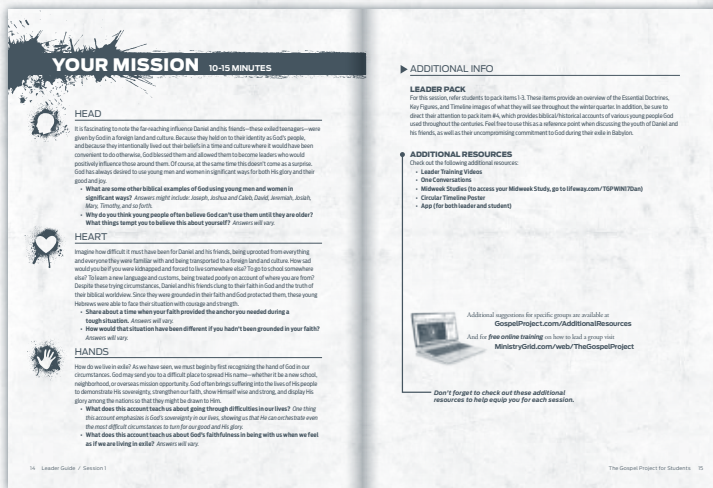
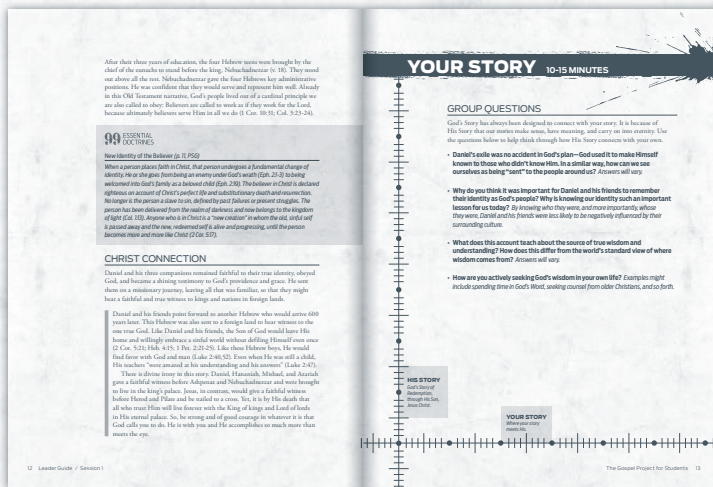
The Your Story section is designed to connect what God has done in the past to students' lives today by introducing group discussion questions that highlight how God's Story connects with their story. There are lead-ins with each question in the Leader Guide to help the leader walk students through each question.

▶ YOUR MISSION

The Your Mission section is designed to show how God's Story is capable of creating lasting transformation into how we think, feel, and live from day to day. By doing so, we emphasize to students that every session goes beyond mere Bible study to a calling to be on mission with God.

▶ ADDITIONAL INFO

The final page of each session points leaders to additional resources that can be used in conjunction with each study. The resources listed, such as teaching tips videos and One Conversations, are designed to help leaders prepare for each session. There is also information about the leader pack posters that can be used with each session.





01

SESSION ONE

In a Foreign Land

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we are inspired by the courage and faithfulness of Daniel and his friends. Since these young men remained true to their identity as God's chosen people and were willing to demonstrate their trust in God through their actions, they provided a testimony to God's power and goodness while in exile. Similarly, believers are sojourners and exiles in this world, redeemed by the blood of Jesus and called to be a testimony to His grace by remaining true to our identity in Christ.

SCRIPTURE

Daniel 1:1-21

THE POINT

Even in a hostile culture, Christians are called to remain true to their identity as God's chosen people.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

On a poster-board, write the word *integrity*, and then place the board at the front of the room where all the students can see it. Draw students' attention to the word *integrity*. Ask them what they think integrity means. After a few minutes of discussion, explain to students that *integrity* means *an unbroken, undefiled honesty or devotion to moral soundness*. There is always a cost associated with integrity, whether we lose something because we want to keep our integrity or we compromise and lose our integrity itself.

Place students into groups of two to four and ask them to discuss how integrity applies to the following: actions, words, and relationships (family, friends, dating, etc.). Ask students to identify negative consequences that might arise from not living with integrity in each of these areas. Then, ask them to explore what it would look like for them to maintain integrity in their actions, words, and relationships. Give a little time for this activity, then draw the group back together to discuss what students came up with.

- **How does your commitment to God affect your actions, words, and relationships?**
- **In what ways do you think God can help you stand firm in your beliefs?**
- **Daniel and his friends stood together in obedience to the Lord. Who do you know that would stand alongside you as you seek to obey God with your life?**

Option 2

Paul instructed believers to obey the government because all authority comes from God (Rom. 13:1), and Daniel also confirmed that only God can choose who will be in charge of the kingdoms of the earth (5:21). However, Daniel disobeyed the king's wishes by not eating the food the king provided (1:8). Some might point an accusing finger at Daniel for this action, but Daniel's obedience to God came before his obedience to the king, and the king was not walking in obedience to God. When leaders disobey God, believers are accountable to God first and our obedience to Him is most important. When leaders God has placed in authority over us ask us to do something illegal, immoral, or harmful to ourselves or others, we *should* disobey. Still, we are responsible for our actions and must remain respectful to those authorities as Daniel and his friends did.

- **What are some instances in which disobedience to governing authorities would be acceptable or even encouraged?**
- **Discuss some honorable ways and dishonorable ways to disobey in those situations.**

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

Even in a hostile culture, Christians are called to remain true to their identity as God's chosen people.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God** - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Daniel** - was taken captive to Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem; remained faithful to God during his time in exile
- **Hananiah, Mishael, Azariah** - Daniel's Hebrew friends who were also taken captive; renamed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego

PLOT

At the end of the last volume we witnessed the fall of Jerusalem by an outside invader—Babylon. Because of their hardness of heart and continual idolatry, God disciplined His people by giving them over to their enemies. At this point in the story, one might think all was lost. The city had been captured, the temple ransacked, and the people destroyed. However, as William Cowper once said, “Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face.” Despite the doom and gloom of these events, God was still at work. He had not abandoned His people. In fact, He is ever-present with those whose hearts remain loyal to Him.

Remember, every time you see this bar in the leader guide, it indicates the same material is also found in the personal study guide as well.

DANIEL AND HIS FRIENDS WERE TAKEN CAPTIVE

The hero of the story we are about to read is not one of the Hebrew teenagers, but the all-powerful God of grace who keeps His promises. At the beginning of the Book of Daniel, we were introduced to four remarkable young men who were uprooted and replanted in the harsh and wicked soil of the Babylonian Empire. Though they were away from home, they were not outside the sovereign plan of God.

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god. Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank. They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king. Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah. And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego. (Dan. 1:1-7)

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

As we saw in previous sessions, the southern kingdom of Judah had been in political and spiritual decline for a long time. King Nebuchadnezzar had attacked Jerusalem and taken many Jewish people captive. (In time, there would be three deportations to Babylon—605, 597, and 586 B. C.) Nebuchadnezzar ordered a man named Ashpenaz to deport the royals and the nobles (Dan. 1:3). This was intended to strip the nation of its best and brightest (v. 4) for the benefit of Babylon.

On the surface of these verses, it looks as if God's people were simply invaded and taken captive. From a different perspective, we see that God's people were able to take God's light into enemy territory. Shinar, Babylon, and the land of Ziggurats (remember the tower of Babel in Genesis 10?)—all these places teeming with idols were suddenly infiltrated by the Lord's army. Israel would be oppressed and her people scattered, but the nations would gain a witness among them to the one true and living God.

TIMELINE

FAITHFUL IN EXILE

When God's people pursue holiness, others take notice.

TESTED BY FIRE

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego trust God for protection.

WALL OF HANDWRITING

Warning of God's judgment and the need to repent.

Remember, these sections are optional and can be skipped if preferred.

In order for God's people to be salt and light in the evil empire of Babylon, they would need to be prepared for the challenges such a culture would throw at them—challenges designed to lead them away from God. Look at the pressures Daniel and his three friends had to face and notice how these pressures are similar to the ones we face in our own culture today.

Whenever you see PSG page numbers listed, it indicates that there is a section in the personal study guide for students to interact with.

- **What challenges do Christians face today that might lead them away from God?** (p. 10, PSG)

1. Isolation. The first step in making Babylonians out of the four Hebrew teenagers was isolation from their homeland, family, and friends (v. 3). The Babylonian strategy was to seize upon their vulnerability once they were separated from all that was familiar. Over time, it was assumed they would be more likely to abandon their faith and become like the Babylonians.
2. Indoctrination. The second step was to take these sharp and impressive young men (v. 4) and enroll them in an educational school for three years (v. 5). They needed to be indoctrinated in the ways of the Babylonians—to become experts in the Babylonian language, philosophy, literature, science, history, and astrology.
3. Assimilation. The third step was to totally immerse these followers of God into the world of Babylon (vv. 4-5). They would need to change their minds and their lifestyle—to eat and drink like the Babylonians. The strategy was to entice them with the delicacies and privileges of their new life. Such an immersion would wear them down and eventually win them over to the Babylonian way of life.
4. Confusion. The final step was to give them new names (v. 7). Their Hebrew names honored the one true God. Daniel meant *God is my Judge*. Hananiah meant *the Lord is gracious*. Mishael meant *who is like God?* Azariah meant *the Lord helps*. In the ancient world, changing one's name was a big deal because the name was at the core of their identity. Giving the Hebrews new names in Babylon was a way of confusing them, reorienting their lives away from their past and toward the pagan gods of Babylonian culture. Daniel and his three friends would have to fight to remember their identity and remain faithful.

- **In what ways would it be easy for Christians to fall prey to these four strategies of making us like the world? How can we strengthen our identity in Christ when facing the pressures of the culture?** (p. 10, PSG)

DANIEL LIVED ACCORDING TO HIS BELIEFS

Despite the Babylonian strategy to convert Daniel and his friends, the young Hebrews were determined not to abandon their convictions or their commitment to God. Watch how they responded when faced with the temptation to compromise:

But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself. And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs, and the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, "I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and your drink; for why should he see that you

were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age? So you would endanger my head with the king.” Then Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, “Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king's food be observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see.” So he listened to them in this matter, and tested them for ten days. At the end of ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king's food. So the steward took away their food and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables. (Dan. 1:8-16)

Notice how Daniel resisted the temptation to defile himself (v. 8). The immersion into the world of pagan Babylon did not win over his heart or mind. The text does not explain why the food was problematic for Daniel. It may have been that the food was unclean for a Hebrew (Lev. 11:1-23); it may have been that the food was offered to idols (Deut. 6:3-15); or it may have communicated an absolute allegiance to the king that Daniel reserved for God alone.

Daniel not only had conviction, but he also had wisdom. He walked in holiness and humility. God caused the officials overseeing Daniel and his friends to look upon Daniel favorably. Daniel shared his faith and convictions with Ashpenaz, winning favor with his superior. Above all, Daniel believed and trusted God to honor his commitment to obedience.

GOD GIVES GRACE TO THOSE WHO SEEK TO LIVE HOLY LIVES BEFORE HIM

Daniel and his friends had faith that God would honor the risk they were taking in seeking to be holy. It was already settled in their hearts that they would remain faithful to their God, no matter what. Daniel and his friends testified to God's grace and power through their service, their wisdom, and their understanding.

As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. At the end of the time, when the king had commanded that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. And the king spoke with them, and among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Therefore they stood before the king. And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom. And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus. (Dan. 1:17-21)

TIMELINE

A FUTURE KING
Isaiah tells of a future king coming from the line of David.

DANIEL IS DELIVERED
God protects Daniel in the lions' den.

THE JOURNEY HOME
God keeps His promise to bring His people home.

After their three years of education, the four Hebrew teens were brought by the chief of the eunuchs to stand before the king, Nebuchadnezzar (v. 18). They stood out above all the rest. Nebuchadnezzar gave the four Hebrews key administrative positions. He was confident that they would serve and represent him well. Already in this Old Testament narrative, God's people lived out of a cardinal principle we are also called to obey: Believers are called to work as if they work for the Lord, because ultimately believers serve Him in all we do (1 Cor. 10:31; Col. 3:23-24).

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

New Identity of the Believer (p. 11, PSG)

When a person places faith in Christ, that person undergoes a fundamental change of identity. He or she goes from being an enemy under God's wrath (Eph. 2:1-3) to being welcomed into God's family as a beloved child (Eph. 2:19). The believer in Christ is declared righteous on account of Christ's perfect life and substitutionary death and resurrection. No longer is the person a slave to sin, defined by past failures or present struggles. The person has been delivered from the realm of darkness and now belongs to the kingdom of light (Col. 1:13). Anyone who is in Christ is a "new creation" in whom the old, sinful self is passed away and the new, redeemed self is alive and progressing, until the person becomes more and more like Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).

CHRIST CONNECTION

Daniel and his three companions remained faithful to their true identity, obeyed God, and became a shining testimony to God's providence and grace. He sent them on a missionary journey, leaving all that was familiar, so that they might bear a faithful and true witness to kings and nations in foreign lands.

Daniel and his friends point forward to another Hebrew who would arrive 600 years later. This Hebrew was also sent to a foreign land to bear witness to the one true God. Like Daniel and his friends, the Son of God would leave His home and willingly embrace a sinful world without defiling Himself even once (2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 1 Pet. 2:21-25). Like these Hebrew boys, He would find favor with God and man (Luke 2:40,52). Even when He was still a child, His teachers "were amazed at his understanding and his answers" (Luke 2:47).

There is divine irony in this story. Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah gave a faithful witness before Ashpenaz and Nebuchadnezzar and were brought to live in the king's palace. Jesus, in contrast, would give a faithful witness before Herod and Pilate and be nailed to a cross. Yet, it is by His death that all who trust Him will live forever with the King of kings and Lord of lords in His eternal palace. So, be strong and of good courage in whatever it is that God calls you to do. He is with you and He accomplishes so much more than meets the eye.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **Daniel's exile was no accident in God's plan—God used it to make Himself known to those who didn't know Him. In a similar way, how can we see ourselves as being "sent" to the people around us?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Why do you think it was important for Daniel and his friends to remember their identity as God's people? Why is knowing our identity such an important lesson for us today?** *By knowing who they were, and more importantly, whose they were, Daniel and his friends were less likely to be negatively influenced by their surrounding culture.*
- **What does this account teach about the source of true wisdom and understanding? How does this differ from the world's standard view of where wisdom comes from?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How are you actively seeking God's wisdom in your own life?** *Examples might include spending time in God's Word, seeking counsel from older Christians, and so forth.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

It is fascinating to note the far-reaching influence Daniel and his friends—these exiled teenagers—were given by God in a foreign land and culture. Because they held on to their identity as God’s people, and because they intentionally lived out their beliefs in a time and culture where it would have been convenient to do otherwise, God blessed them and allowed them to become leaders who would positively influence those around them. Of course, at the same time this doesn’t come as a surprise. God has always desired to use young men and women in significant ways for both His glory and their good and joy.

- **What are some other biblical examples of God using young men and women in significant ways?** *Answers might include: Joseph, Joshua and Caleb, David, Jeremiah, Josiah, Mary, Timothy, and so forth.*
- **Why do you think young people often believe God can’t use them until they are older? What things tempt you to believe this about yourself?** *Answers will vary.*



HEART

Imagine how difficult it must have been for Daniel and his friends, being uprooted from everything and everyone they were familiar with and being transported to a foreign land and culture. How sad would you be if you were kidnapped and forced to live somewhere else? To go to school somewhere else? To learn a new language and customs, being treated poorly on account of where you are from? Despite these trying circumstances, Daniel and his friends clung to their faith in God and the truth of their biblical worldview. Since they were grounded in their faith and God protected them, these young Hebrews were able to face their situation with courage and strength.

- **Share about a time when your faith provided the anchor you needed during a tough situation.** *Answers will vary.*
- **How would that situation have been different if you hadn’t been grounded in your faith?** *Answers will vary.*



HANDS

How do we live in exile? As we have seen, we must begin by first recognizing the hand of God in our circumstances. God may send you to a difficult place to spread His name—whether it be a new school, neighborhood, or overseas mission opportunity. God often brings suffering into the lives of His people to demonstrate His sovereignty, strengthen our faith, show Himself wise and strong, and display His glory among the nations so that they might be drawn to Him.

- **What does this account teach us about going through difficulties in our lives?** *One thing this account emphasizes is God’s sovereignty in our lives, showing us that He can orchestrate even the most difficult circumstances to turn for our good and His glory.*
- **What does this account teach us about God’s faithfulness in being with us when we feel as if we are living in exile?** *Answers will vary.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack items 1-3. These items provide an overview of the Essential Doctrines, Key Figures, and Timeline images of what they will see throughout the winter quarter. In addition, be sure to direct their attention to pack item #4, which provides biblical/historical accounts of various young people God used throughout the centuries. Feel free to use this as a reference point when discussing the youth of Daniel and his friends, as well as their uncompromising commitment to God during their exile in Babylon.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPWIN17Dan)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at
GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for ***free online training*** on how to lead a group visit
MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject

Don't forget to check out these additional resources to help equip you for each session.



02

SESSION TWO

Protection in the Furnace

SESSION SUMMARY

God alone is worthy of our allegiance, devotion, and worship. In the midst of opposition, persecution, and threats to our lives, we trust the One who is able to deliver and sustain us. In this session, we see three exiled men who refused to participate in the idolatry of their captors. Trusting that God is sovereign and good, they were confident in His protection. One of the ways we display the glory of God today is by obeying Christ, no matter the consequences.

SCRIPTURE

Daniel 3:8-30

THE POINT

God alone deserves our ultimate allegiance.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

In Philippians 1:21, the apostle Paul wrote, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” In other words, “If I live I get Christ. If I die I get more of Christ. Either way, I win!”

A martyred missionary to the Huaorani people group, the Auca Indians, Nate Saint (1923-1956) saw his life this way. He wrote: “The way I see it, we ought to be willing to die. In the military, we were taught that to obtain our objectives we had to be willing to be expendable. Missionaries must face that same expendability.”¹ This sense of expendability should not only belong to missionaries, but also to every follower of Jesus.

This way of looking at life and death—of realizing both are in God’s hands—must have been familiar to the three Hebrew men we encountered in the previous session: Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Taken captive to Babylon in 605 B. C., their names were changed to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. In today’s session, we don’t simply see these men display “courage under fire,” but “courage *in* the fire!”

- **What do you think it would look like for you to live like “living is Christ and dying is gain”?**
- **How would your life look different if you looked at life and death as Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah did—both in God’s hands and under His authority?**

Option 2

Allegiance. This word isn’t one we hear often today. The United States has a Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag, which contains the line, “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America...” Those who say Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag are instructed to be respectful. There is even a “Flag Code” that dictates how the Pledge should be said. This code calls for the highest level of respect: people stand facing the flag, with the right hand placed over the heart. Military personnel must silently face and salute the flag as the pledge is said.² *All of this for a flag.* But to the United States, the flag represents a united nation and respect for what it took to get to that point. The Pledge is meant to be a symbol of devotion and commitment, a statement that aligns the people with their country, and a promise to stand with it no matter what.

In the same way, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah had pledged their allegiance to God. Despite being taken in captivity to a foreign land and being ordered to worship something other than God, they stood firm with God. They knew that no matter what the consequences, their hearts belonged to God and they would not bow to or express their allegiance to any other authority.

- **What do you think it means to express allegiance to God?**
- **Describe how you might react if you had to choose between following God or an earthly leader.**

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God alone deserves our ultimate allegiance.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God** - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Hananiah, Mishael, Azariah** - Daniel's Hebrew friends who were also taken captive; renamed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego

PLOT

During our last session we were introduced to a young man named Daniel and three of his Jewish friends. These young men were taken to Babylon as captives after Jerusalem's fall. God blessed their faithfulness during the exile, granting them wisdom and favor in the sight of high government officials in a foreign land. In this session, we witness the faithfulness of these young men as they refused to participate in the Babylonians' idolatry, and we also see God's willingness to spare them from their enemies.

TIMELINE

TESTED BY FIRE
Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego trust God for protection.

WALL OF HANDWRITING
Warning of God's judgment and the need to repent.

A FUTURE KING
Isaiah tells of a future king coming from the line of David.

NEBUCHADNEZZAR BUILDS AN IDOL

King Nebuchadnezzar once paid homage and praise to Daniel's God (2:46-47), but his devotion was shallow and short-lived. In chapter 3, Nebuchadnezzar set up a great statue that was 90 feet tall with a width of 9 feet, gold plated from head to toe (3:1).

The biblical writer went to great lengths to note the idolatrous nature of this statue of gold. The word "image" occurred more than 10 times in chapter 3, and as you know, God's people were forbidden to worship graven "images" of any sort (Ex. 20:4).

So how would the Jewish exiles respond to the king's decree to bow down to this statue? Let's take a look:

Therefore at that time certain Chaldeans came forward and maliciously accused the Jews. They declared to King Nebuchadnezzar, "O king, live forever! You, O king, have made a decree, that every man who hears the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, shall fall down and worship the golden image. And whoever does not fall down and worship shall be cast into a burning fiery furnace. There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These men, O king, pay no attention to you; they do not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up." (Dan. 3:8-12)

When the time came to bow down and worship the image as commanded by the king, three men remained standing (v. 12). There was no fanfare or outburst of protest, just a quiet act of civil disobedience. Quickly, the enemies of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego sprung into action, accusing them before the king.

Notice the enemies' tactics here. They asked the king if he saw what these young men did—or rather didn't do. First, "they pay no attention to you." (They don't respect you.) Secondly, "they do not serve your gods" (On this one, the enemies were correct!) Third, "They do not...worship the golden image that you have set up." (Right again!) In essence, the enemies accused the Jewish men of failing to give ultimate allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar.

So it would appear that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were in a no-win situation. The critics came out in the open, they carefully called out the king, and he had to do something to save face. The future did not look bright for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

GOD'S PEOPLE REFUSE TO BOW TO THE IDOL

In light of the situation they faced, how would these young men respond to the charges against them? What would they do? Or, more importantly, what would God do next?

Then Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought. So they brought these men before the king. Nebuchadnezzar answered and said to them, “Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?” Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.” Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with fury, and the expression of his face was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. He ordered the furnace heated seven times more than it was usually heated. And he ordered some of the mighty men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace. Then these men were bound in their cloaks, their tunics, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the burning fiery furnace. Because the king's order was urgent and the furnace overheated, the flame of the fire killed those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the burning fiery furnace. (Dan. 3:13-23)

Nebuchadnezzar was furious. The three Jews resisted the herd mentality and bravely stood alone (apparently Daniel was not present). The king commanded that they be brought before him (v. 13). He asked if the accusations were true that they would not serve his gods or “worship” the golden statue he set up (v. 14).

Before allowing them to answer, the king gave them a second chance (v. 15). Maybe he suspected they were accused by jealous rivals. Perhaps he genuinely liked them and was looking to provide them a way out of this political mess. If they would simply repent of disobeying the king, bow down, and worship his idol, all would be well and good. But if they did not, they would be immediately burned alive in the fiery furnace.

Then Nebuchadnezzar asked the question that is the key to the entire episode: “And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?” In other words: “If you are so foolish to ignore my gracious offer, who is going to save you?”

The three Jews were glad he asked. The answer to that question had been settled in their hearts long ago. If challenged to worship the gods of this world and be praised or to worship the One true and living God and be burned to a crisp, they would follow God. Regardless of what the immediate outcome might be, three things were clear: First, God's servants would only bow down to Him and no one else; Second, God's servants would trust in God's sovereign purposes no matter what; Third, God's servants would trust in God's power and protection, leaving what would happen to His providential plan.

GOD SHOWS UP AND PROTECTS HIS PEOPLE

These young men weren't sure how their situation would unfold. Would God spare them? Or would God allow the evil directed against them to continue? Yet, despite not knowing how God would respond, the young men stood firmly in the belief that God is in control, no matter the end result. Let's see how the story ends.

Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He declared to his counselors, "Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?" They answered and said to the king, "True, O king." He answered and said, "But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods." Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the burning fiery furnace; he declared, "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out, and come here!" Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire. And the satraps, the prefects, the governors, and the king's counselors gathered together and saw that the fire had not had any power over the bodies of those men. The hair of their heads was not singed, their cloaks were not harmed, and no smell of fire had come upon them. Nebuchadnezzar answered and said, "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God. Therefore I make a decree: Any people, nation, or language that speaks anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego shall be torn limb from limb, and their houses laid in ruins, for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way." Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the province of Babylon.(Dan. 3:24-30)

So, the three Hebrews were bound and tossed into the furnace, fully clothed (v. 21). Nebuchadnezzar and his loyal, pagan, idolatrous subjects sat back and watched what would certainly be an object lesson for all who tried to go against the king's commands.

TIMELINE

DANIEL IS DELIVERED

God protects Daniel in the lions' den.

THE JOURNEY HOME

God keeps His promise to bring His people home.

REBUILDING THE TEMPLE

Despite immense opposition the temple is rebuilt.

But something unexpected happened. The king himself was shocked and jumped out of his seat (v. 24). The men did not die. In fact, they were no longer bound, but were walking around as if being in a fiery furnace did not harm them (v. 25). Second, and more importantly, there were four men walking around in the furnace and the fourth had the appearance “the appearance...is like a son of the gods.”

Nebuchadnezzar invited the three Jewish men out of the furnace for all to see that the fire had brought no bodily harm to them (v. 27). In fact, there was no evidence that these men were in the furnace: no singed hair, no burnt clothes, and not even the scent of fire. The king rightly attributed this to their God (v. 28), the God he called “the Most High God” (v. 26), and earlier called “God of gods and Lord of kings” (2:47).

- **What are some other examples in Scripture where we see God being a Savior who draws near to His people during their time of need?** (See Ex. 3:6,12; Isa. 43:2; Matt. 28:18-20; Rom. 8:37-39; Heb. 13:5; 1 Pet. 4:12-14). (p. 18, PSG)

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Church and Kingdom (p. 18, PSG)

The church and the kingdom of God are closely related, though not identical. When the Bible speaks of the kingdom of God, it is referring to the reign of God in the world. The church is the people of God who live under His loving rule now, in anticipation of the full manifestation of God's kingdom in the future. The church's mission is to witness to God's kingdom, proclaiming God's message of salvation through Christ and demonstrating the power of the gospel through good works, so that others may be brought to live under God's reign.

CHRIST CONNECTION

When Nebuchadnezzar looked into the fiery furnace, he saw four men instead of three. He said the fourth “the appearance...is like a son of the gods” (v. 25). Later he said he was an “angel” (v. 28). That was not a bad guess for a pagan polytheist. However, we know better. The fourth person in the furnace was the One we know as *Immanuel*, or *God with us*. The One who walked with them in and through the fire is also the One who walked through the very fires of hell on our behalf, that we too would not have a single cell of our souls singed by the flames we actually deserve.

The reason we can have confidence while in the furnace of affliction is because we trust in the power and presence of God. Knowing God is with us brings encouragement, joy, and hope to our souls. May God give us courage in the fire to represent the One who has delivered us from an eternal fire, a fire He endured in our place.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **What are some areas of life in which Christians are criticized for obeying God rather than culture or popular opinion?** *Answers may include areas such as morals (for instance, following what God has to say about physical intimacy in a relationship versus what culture deems appropriate), the means of salvation (the Bible is clear in that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, on the basis of what Jesus has accomplished through His life, death, and resurrection), and so forth.*
- **What are some ways Christians can demonstrate to their surrounding culture that their ultimate allegiance is to God, not men?** *Answers may include the importance of speaking God's truth through their words and affirming God's truth through their actions.*
- **What can we learn from the Jewish men's confession of faith when they claimed they would follow God even if He chose not to deliver them?** *The central truth we learn from their confession is that obedience and faith in God are not dependent upon whether or not things turn out the way we want.*
- **What does this account teach us about the character of God and His relationship to His people? How does this encourage you as you face difficulties in your own life?** *Answers will vary.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

Theologians have long debated the identity of the fourth individual in the furnace. Some believe this is a *theophany*, or a *manifestation of God's presence*. Others call this a *Christophany*, or a *preincarnate appearance of the second person of the Trinity, the Son of God*. Regardless, the important thing to note is that the Lord was there with them. The God who did not deliver them from the fire was the God who met them *in* the fire and delivered them out of the fire.

- **When has God chosen not to deliver you from a trial, and instead met you in the midst of the trial?** *While answers will vary, help students to sense the weight of the point behind the question—God doesn't necessarily promise that we won't face trials, but He does promise to be present with us in the midst of them.*
- **What is the impact of sensing God's presence when you face difficulties?** *Answers will vary.*



HEART

It's hard for us to identify with Nebuchadnezzar in this account, but maybe we should. Do we not sometimes exalt ourselves in similar ways? Do we not often act as if matters of destiny are in our hands and not God's? Do we not draw attention to who we are, who we know, and what we have done? Is the same pride that is in the heart of this king not lurking in our own? When we are honest with ourselves, we will come to the conclusion that we also have pride within our own hearts and that this pride causes us to trust in ourselves rather than in the God of our salvation.

- **In what areas of your life have you played the role of Nebuchadnezzar?** *The point behind this question is to get students to think of areas in which they tend to be less reliant upon God and more reliant upon themselves. It is one thing to be reliant upon God during the tragedies of life, but what about relying upon God in the seemingly small, everyday events?*
- **How does the faith of these young Jewish men encourage you when it comes to dealing with pride in your own heart?** *Answers will vary.*



HANDS

Honoring and obeying God is not always popular. Sometimes, allegiance to God leads to serious problems and, in many cases, life-threatening situations. While the latter may not often be your experience, it is a daily reality for many of our brothers and sisters around the world. Simply trying to live a life that is faithful to the God and Savior they love, these believers are criticized, ostracized, and hated. Still, they declare by words and actions that we obey God above men (Acts 5:29).

- **How does this account help us remain strong in faith as we seek to follow Jesus today?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What are some ways we can encourage and support brothers and sisters in Christ around the world who face intense opposition to their faith?** *Answers might include praying for them; supporting them financially; speaking out on their behalf, even when others won't, and so forth.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

SOURCES

1. Marvin J. Newell, *Expect Great Things: Mission Quotes that Inform and Inspire* (Pasadena: William Carey Library Publishers, 2013), 51.
2. “The Pledge of Allegiance,” *US History.org*, accessed May 10, 2016, <http://www.ushistory.org/documents/pledge.htm>.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPWIN17Dan)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
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03

SESSION THREE

The Handwriting on the Wall

SESSION SUMMARY

As we continue our study of how God sustained His people in exile, we come to a scene in which God demonstrated His opposition to those who rise against Him and ignore His warnings. The story of Belshazzar and the “writing on the wall” is a vivid illustration of the truth that “the Most High God rules the kingdom of mankind and sets over it whom he will” (Dan. 5:21). From this event, we learn that we should not place our faith in the security of earthly kingdoms or leaders who exalt themselves above God. Knowing the consequences of rebellion, we heed the warnings of God and lovingly warn others of God’s judgment.

SCRIPTURE

Daniel 5:1-9,13-31

THE POINT

God opposes those who remain prideful against Him.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Just as God wrote the law in stone with His finger (Ex. 31:18), He wrote a message of warning on the wall in front of Belshazzar and his party guests. Although God may not write on the wall to warn you about the direction your life has taken, He warns us of the consequences of certain behaviors in His Word. Write the following on a white board or poster board at the front of the room: *God's warning, God's judgment, trusting in human power rather than God, placing one's security in the things of the world instead of the eternal, exalting oneself above God, unrepentant sin and consequences.*

Allow students to work in pairs to find an example in Scripture that demonstrates each of these themes. Ask for volunteers to share their answers, then ask the students to consider how these themes or stories may apply to their own lives.

- **In what ways has God warned you of the consequences of your sin? How did you respond?**
- **When have you been tempted to trust in something or someone other than God for security?**
- **How does continuing in our sin and placing our security and trust in the wrong things allow us to exalt ourselves above God?**

Option 2

In most U. S. states, when you go to the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) to get your drivers permit or license, you have to take a signs test in addition to the driving test. There are many different types of signs, including construction signs, directional signs, warning signs, regulation signs, and recreation signs. With road signs, both the shape and the color of the signs often indicate the meaning.

- **What are some common signs that indicate direction or warnings on the roadways?**

In the same way that these road signs give directions and warn us of coming changes or trouble, God also warns us through His Word and His people. In today's session, God warned Belshazzar through Daniel. Belshazzar trusted in himself rather than God, exalted himself above God, and failed to repent of his sin. For these reasons, God sent a warning to Belshazzar of what would come because of his disobedience and opposition.

- **How might God be warning you about certain sins and consequences in your own life? What can you do to focus on God and obeying Him above all?**

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God opposes those who remain prideful against Him.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God** - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Belshazzar** - king of Babylon; grandson of Nebuchadnezzar
- **Daniel** - was taken captive to Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem; remained faithful to God during his time in exile

PLOT

Years had passed and another Babylonian king was in charge. The grandson of Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, rose to power and the sinful tendencies in this family were passed down from generation to generation. He brought out the items taken from God's temple for use at a party with other nobles. Not only that, but the guests also praised other gods as they used the objects that were devoted to the one true God. As a display of power, majesty, and authority God sent a message to Belshazzar through a hand writing on the wall. Though "wise men" were called, no one could interpret the message except Daniel.

TIMELINE

WALL OF HANDWRITING

Warning of God's judgment and the need to repent.

A FUTURE KING

Isaiah tells of a future king coming from the line of David.

DANIEL IS DELIVERED

God protects Daniel in the lions' den.

GOD RESPONDED TO BELSHAZZAR'S SIN

The Hebrew people had been defeated and exiled, but God was in control and they were learning to trust Him even when they could not see His hand at work. There is a chronological gap of roughly 20 years between Daniel 4 and Daniel 5. Up until this point, we have dealt with King Nebuchadnezzar. However, in this chapter, we are introduced to his successor—King Belshazzar.

King Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords and drank wine in front of the thousand. Belshazzar, when he tasted the wine, commanded that the vessels of gold and of silver that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken out of the temple in Jerusalem be brought, that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them. Then they brought in the golden vessels that had been taken out of the temple, the house of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines drank from them. They drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone. Immediately the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, opposite the lampstand. And the king saw the hand as it wrote. Then the king's color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together. The king called loudly to bring in the enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the astrologers. The king declared to the wise men of Babylon, "Whoever reads this writing, and shows me its interpretation, shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around his neck and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom." Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or make known to the king the interpretation. Then King Belshazzar was greatly alarmed, and his color changed, and his lords were perplexed. (Dan. 5:1-9)

Here the all-powerful Babylonian king, Belshazzar, was throwing a party for the ages. However, what he didn't know was that he was the last in the line of Babylonian kings. Darius the Mede was about to invade Babylon and bring its empire to an end.

Many bad decisions were being made at this party—drunkenness and blasphemy being two of them. In Belshazzar's drunken stupor, he commanded that the vessels of gold and silver, which Nebuchadnezzar stole from the Temple in Jerusalem, be brought so that his fellow party guests might drink from them. Then, they added idolatrous worship to their behavior as they praised their false gods. By doing so, Belshazzar was not only mocking the God of the Jews, but was also celebrating the gods of Babylon as being superior.

Suddenly, the king was brought to his senses. What yanked him back into reality? The same fingers that wrote the Ten Commandments for the Hebrew people (Ex. 31:18; Deut. 9:10) also confronted blasphemous Belshazzar with his sins and told of imminent judgment.

The king tried to gain his composure and get a grip on things, but that was difficult to say the least. He called for Babylon's "wise men" and promised them honor, wealth, and status if they could interpret the writing on the wall. However, these trusted and "wise men" of Babylon proved to be totally useless. And as a result, the king began to realize the danger he faced.

- **When have you faced something difficult and had to learn to trust God even though you didn't see Him at work in that situation?** (*p. 22, PSG*)

DANIEL CONFRONTED BELSHAZZAR

The story continued when Daniel, then much older, was brought before the king to interpret the strange message on the wall. As we see in Daniel's translation of the message, King Belshazzar was guilty of failing to learn from his predecessor—Nebuchadnezzar—that pride goes before a fall. Exalt yourself against God, and you will be struck down.

Then Daniel was brought in before the king. The king answered and said to Daniel, "You are that Daniel, one of the exiles of Judah, whom the king my father brought from Judah. I have heard of you that the spirit of the gods is in you, and that light and understanding and excellent wisdom are found in you. Now the wise men, the enchanters, have been brought in before me to read this writing and make known to me its interpretation, but they could not show the interpretation of the matter. But I have heard that you can give interpretations and solve problems. Now if you can read the writing and make known to me its interpretation, you shall be clothed with purple and have a chain of gold around your neck and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom." Then Daniel answered and said before the king, "Let your gifts be for yourself, and give your rewards to another. Nevertheless, I will read the writing to the king and make known to him the interpretation. O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father kingship and greatness and glory and majesty. And because of the greatness that he gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him. Whom he would, he killed, and whom he would, he kept alive; whom he would, he raised up, and whom he would, he humbled. But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit was hardened so that he dealt proudly, he was brought down from his kingly throne, and his glory was taken from him. He was driven from among the children of mankind, and his mind was made like that of a beast, and his dwelling was with the wild donkeys. He was fed grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, until he knew that the Most High God rules the

kingdom of mankind and sets over it whom he will. And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this, but you have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven. And the vessels of his house have been brought in before you, and you and your lords, your wives, and your concubines have drunk wine from them. And you have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know, but the God in whose hand is your breath, and whose are all your ways, you have not honored. “Then from his presence the hand was sent, and this writing was inscribed.” (Dan. 5:13-24)

Daniel’s response to the king’s offered reward was not disrespectful, but direct. To paraphrase: “Keep your stuff or give it to someone else. I don’t need it and I don’t want it.” Daniel knew his wisdom in interpretation came from God. He would not exercise his gift in order to earn rewards from the king; he utilized the gift in order to communicate God’s message to the king.

According to Daniel, the Most High God gave Belshazzar’s grandfather, Nebuchadnezzar, his kingdom along with the glory and privileges that go with such a position. His grandfather became arrogant and prideful, so God took him down and caused him to live like a beast, with animals like oxen and donkeys. God did this so that he would know God rules over all and even sets earthly rulers in place as He wills (v. 21). By saying this, Daniel was essentially pointing the finger at Belshazzar and saying he should know better because of what happened to his grandfather.

DANIEL INTERPRETED GOD’S WARNING

Next, Daniel translated the writing that was inscribed on the wall. It was bad news for Belshazzar.

And this is the writing that was inscribed: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, and PARSIN. This is the interpretation of the matter: MENE, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; TEKEL, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting; PERES, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.” Then Belshazzar gave the command, and Daniel was clothed with purple, a chain of gold was put around his neck, and a proclamation was made about him, that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom. That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed.” (Dan. 5:25-31)

Belshazzar showed no signs of repentance for his arrogance, blasphemies, idolatry, pride, and sensualities. He died that night, Darius the Mede took over the kingdom. The Babylonian king had challenged and mocked the Most High God. He had been confronted with his sin and showed no repentance. In this case, God’s judgment came as fast as a lightning bolt from heaven.

TIMELINE

THE JOURNEY HOME

God keeps His promise to bring His people home.

REBUILDING THE TEMPLE

Despite immense opposition the temple is rebuilt.

REBUILDING THE TEMPLE

Despite immense opposition the temple is rebuilt.

To those who knew the Scriptures, this was no surprise. God’s prophets had already laid out Babylon’s destiny. They knew this kingdom was a passing fad, here today and gone tomorrow, according to God’s timing.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

God is Omnipotent (p. 23, PSG)

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.

CHRIST CONNECTION

In this story,, an exiled Hebrew man came out of nowhere to confront the powers of their world with their sins of blasphemy, mockery, arrogance, pride, and idolatry. He was a man of impeccable character who could not be bought or seduced by the idols of this world. Why? Because in this man of unsurpassed wisdom was the Spirit of the Holy God (v. 11). In fact, even the pagans acknowledged his good testimony that he had “an excellent spirit, knowledge, and understanding to interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve problems” (v. 12).

This sounds familiar with respect to another exile from Judah who came on the scene in the first century—a man by the name of Jesus who said God had anointed Him and that the Spirit of the Lord was on Him (Luke 4:18). Later, even His enemies admitted that no one had ever spoken as He did (John 7:46). Daniel pointed forward to the coming Messiah.

Daniel’s wisdom, abilities, and position were similar to the patriarch Joseph (Gen. 37-50). His life looked back. However, as the mediator of God’s wisdom to sinful humanity, his life looks forward to the ultimate mediator between God and humanity, the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 2:5), the One Paul described as the wisdom of God for His people (1 Cor. 1:30), and the One in whom we find all wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:3).

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **Belshazzar's sin made him dull to and unaware of what was taking place around him. What are some modern day examples of sin dulling our senses? Why do you think sin blinds us and makes us oblivious to reality?** *Persistent sin can cause one to become hardened and desensitized to the things of God. If one is engaged in immoral sexual behavior or is constantly trying to find ways to cheat in school, that person will likely fail to see how that sin is not only hurting himself, but also those around him.*
- **What are the major character distinctions between Daniel and Belshazzar? Between the two, which character shows up more in your own life?** *Answers will vary.*
- **When have you sensed God warning you away from sin or self-exaltation?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What can we learn from this account when it comes to listening to God's wisdom over the wisdom of this world?** *Answers will vary.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

It is interesting to note that the “wise men” of Babylon could not interpret Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in chapter 2 and had to be bailed out by Daniel and that the same thing happened again in chapter 4. For the third time, the king’s “wise men” were brought in and failed to interpret the message. Because of accounts like these, we are reminded to not put our trust in worldly wisdom, but in the unfailing wisdom that comes from God.

- **When have you felt pressure to choose between the wisdom of this world and wisdom revealed in Scripture? What was the outcome of that situation?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Why can we have assurance that biblical wisdom will win every time, even over the best of human wisdom?** *Biblical wisdom not only instructs us on what we should know, but also teaches us how to live life well. Because it connects directly with everyday life, biblical wisdom will always be the best decision.*



HEART

This story reminds us once again of the spiritual dangers of a prideful heart. Pride tries to elevate the self above God by denying any dependence upon Him. Belshazzar was prideful and acted out on that pride by gloating over the items stolen from the temple. As Scripture makes abundantly clear, God opposes the prideful but gives grace to those who are humble and acknowledge their complete dependence upon Him (Jas. 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5).

- **Why do you think it is easy to recognize pride in others but often difficult to see it within ourselves?** *Answers will vary.*
- **In what areas has pride surfaced in your own life?** *Answers will vary.*



HANDS

This story not only teaches us how to stand up for truth even when it isn’t personally convenient, but also how to respectfully challenge those who are clearly in sin and in need of personal repentance. Daniel wasn’t assured that speaking the truth and confronting Belshazzar’s sin would result in his personal safety. After all, the pagan king could have reacted quite negatively to what Daniel had to say. Nevertheless, Daniel did what he was called to do, giving us an example of how to speak truth in a loving way, while calling others to repentance.

- **Give an example of when you or someone you know stood up for truth when it wasn’t personally convenient.** *Answers will vary.*
- **Why is it important that we focus both on speaking truth and being gracious in the manner in which we speak?** *The truth of what we say and the tone in which we say it go hand-in-hand. Not only are we called to be bearers of truth, but we are also called to display the type of character that embodies that truth in our daily interactions with others.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack item #5, which contains a discussion poster regarding things people tend to place their ultimate trust in. Use this as you walk through the session, noting how king Belshazzar had misplaced trust in himself, in his “wise” advisors, and so forth.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPWIN17Dan)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at

GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for ***free online training*** on how to lead a group visit

MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject

04

SESSION FOUR

Protection in the Lions' Den

SESSION SUMMARY

In today's session, we encounter Daniel as he ministered to King Darius. Because of the king's edict, Daniel was thrown into lions' den. Through God's supernatural protection, Daniel escaped the claws and teeth of the lions. This happened so the nations would know that the God of Daniel, "is the living God enduring forever; his kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion shall be to the end" (v. 26). Daniel demonstrated that God's people are to show courage as we trust and obey Him, despite the circumstances. Our courageous witness of faith will be a sign to the world that Jesus is the one true King.

SCRIPTURE

Daniel 6:1-28

THE POINT

God glorifies Himself through the rescue of those who trust Him.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Have you ever played a game of Bible trivia or word association, in which you match well-known people and events? Here are a few examples:

Adam and _____. Cain and _____. Noah and the _____. Jacob and _____. Samson and _____.
David and _____. Sodom and _____. Jonah and the _____.

And what do you think of when you hear the name Daniel? Most likely, you think of a “lions’ den.” Now we’ve arrived at the most famous story in the book of Daniel. This man of God ruled with wisdom under Nebuchadnezzar (5:12). He had a good reputation and was known to be a man of character, filled with the Spirit of God. No one had anything negative to say about him, even into the reign of Belshazzar, the last Babylonian King. Even king Darius shared their opinion and appointed Daniel to a position of significant leadership.

Suddenly, Daniel faced a crisis—a major test of faith. Within a few short days, we see a faithful 80-year-old man thrown into a pit with ravenous lions ready to tear him apart. Why? Because he wouldn’t stop praying.

- **What do you know about the story of Daniel in the lions’ den? Why do you think this particular story has become so well known in culture and in the church?**

Option 2

Even when our lives are busy, we make time for what is important to us. Ask the students to list things they make time for during the week. This list may include: sports, clubs, concerts, time with friends and family, and so on. As we make time for the activities we want to do and the goals we want to accomplish, we create work patterns and habits that follow us throughout life. We learn to “show up” to follow through with what we have committed to do.

- **What are some commitments you have made? Have you ever missed something you committed to attend? What happened?**

Daniel was fully committed to God. Even when he was young, He was loyal to God no matter what he faced. He built up habits, and *a life*, committed to following God completely. When threatened for worshipping God, he continued anyway. And God faithfully delivered Him from death.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God glorifies Himself through the rescue of those who trust Him.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God** - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Daniel** - was taken captive to Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem; remained faithful to God during his time in exile
- **King Darius** - one of the kings of Babylon during Daniel's exile

PLOT

Our story picks up with Daniel years later, serving in a high administrative role to King Darius. Not only does this session demonstrate God's favor upon Daniel in terms of his influence with the king, but it also presents the familiar account of Daniel being cast into the lions' den. Through God's supernatural protection, Daniel escaped the claws and teeth of the lions, showing us a courageous example of faith in God.

TIMELINE

DANIEL IS DELIVERED

God protects Daniel in the lions' den.

THE JOURNEY HOME

God keeps His promise to bring His people home.

REBUILDING THE TEMPLE

Despite immense opposition the temple is rebuilt.

DANIEL REMAINS FAITHFUL TO GOD

Daniel's rise in power was not because of his natural ability, but because God worked in Daniel's life, and Daniel walked with God. Still, as many have discovered, it can get lonely at the top. Success can increase your enemies. The blessings of the righteous can stir up the jealousy of the wicked. In the passage that follows, we see the plot to bring down Daniel.

It pleased Darius to set over the kingdom 120 satraps, to be throughout the whole kingdom; and over them three high officials, of whom Daniel was one, to whom these satraps should give account, so that the king might suffer no loss. Then this Daniel became distinguished above all the other high officials and satraps, because an excellent spirit was in him. And the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom. Then the high officials and the satraps sought to find a ground for complaint against Daniel with regard to the kingdom, but they could find no ground for complaint or any fault, because he was faithful, and no error or fault was found in him. Then these men said, "We shall not find any ground for complaint against this Daniel unless we find it in connection with the law of his God." Then these high officials and satraps came by agreement to the king and said to him, "O King Darius, live forever! All the high officials of the kingdom, the prefects and the satraps, the counselors and the governors are agreed that the king should establish an ordinance and enforce an injunction, that whoever makes petition to any god or man for thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions. Now, O king, establish the injunction and sign the document, so that it cannot be changed, according to the law of the Medes and the Persians, which cannot be revoked." Therefore King Darius signed the document and injunction. When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously. (Dan. 6:1-10)

According to this passage, Daniel displayed excellent character and those around him noticed a difference. However, because of the envy and jealousy of the other officials, a plot was devised to ruin Daniel's reputation. Of course, these deceptive officials faced a serious problem—they could find nothing that would incriminate Daniel or call his character into question.

Daniel was the model worker and employee. Daniel's walk with God was consistent. When emergencies or crises presented themselves, Daniel was already prepared to meet and handle them. His daily communion with God shaped his character. He knew who he was and what was required of him.

The officials knew if they wanted Daniel gone, they had to use his integrity against him. By manipulating Darius into making an irreversible decree, the officials hoped to trap Daniel in an act of disobedience to the king. Their goal was not to see Daniel demoted; their goal was to see Daniel dead.

When Daniel found out Darius signed an edict honoring himself as the exclusive deity of the empire, what did he do? What he had always done. He obeyed God rather than man. He continued a pattern of spiritual devotion that had marked his life for years, a pattern his enemies knew well. He went to his home, upstairs to the place of prayer, where the windows were open toward Jerusalem. He then got down on his knees and prayed three times daily, as he had always done.

DANIEL TRUSTS GOD FOR DELIVERANCE

Godly people seek to remain faithful to God, no matter what may happen or what circumstances they may encounter. In this passage, Daniel demonstrated his complete dependence on the Lord for rescue.

Then these men came by agreement and found Daniel making petition and plea before his God. Then they came near and said before the king, concerning the injunction, “O king! Did you not sign an injunction, that anyone who makes petition to any god or man within thirty days except to you, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions?” The king answered and said, “The thing stands fast, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be revoked.” Then they answered and said before the king, “Daniel, who is one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, O king, or the injunction you have signed, but makes his petition three times a day.” Then the king, when he heard these words, was much distressed and set his mind to deliver Daniel. And he labored till the sun went down to rescue him. Then these men came by agreement to the king and said to the king, “Know, O king, that it is a law of the Medes and Persians that no injunction or ordinance that the king establishes can be changed.” Then the king commanded, and Daniel was brought and cast into the den of lions. The king declared to Daniel, “May your God, whom you serve continually, deliver you!” And a stone was brought and laid on the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet and with the signet of his lords, that nothing might be changed concerning Daniel. Then the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting; no diversions were brought to him, and sleep fled from him. (Dan. 6:11-18)

King Darius was upset about the situation and tried to find a way to deliver a man he obviously admired, appreciated, and respected. Unfortunately, Darius was caught in a trap of his own making. His evil administrators reminded him once more (the decree is mentioned four times for emphasis and effect) of the binding nature of the law of the Medes and Persians. When the King made a law, even he was bound by his words.

More importantly, these evil men had counted on Daniel to be true to His God. Daniel knew that past faithfulness would be no substitute for present faithfulness. Indeed, the past had simply prepared him for the present and the future. One's character is not *forged* in the moment of adversity, but is *revealed* in the moment of adversity.

Most likely, Daniel knew about his friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and their experience in the fiery furnace. Showing the same kind of backbone and conviction, Daniel did not falter in his faith. Just as his friends had told King Nebuchadnezzar that their allegiance to God trumped every idol, Daniel demonstrated to Darius that his fidelity to God was not subject to debate.

Much to his regret, Darius then commanded that Daniel be thrown into the lions' den. The den was probably a pit with an opening at the top. The king also sealed Daniel's tomb with the royal signet rings. We can only imagine the joy of these lords when this took place.

GOD SAVES DANIEL AND GLORIFIES HIS NAME

So what happened next? The next morning king Darius returned, fully expecting the den to be the tomb for whatever remained of Daniel's body. But Darius was in for a surprise.

Then, at break of day, the king arose and went in haste to the den of lions. As he came near to the den where Daniel was, he cried out in a tone of anguish. The king declared to Daniel, "O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to deliver you from the lions?" Then Daniel said to the king, "O king, live forever! My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths, and they have not harmed me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no harm." Then the king was exceedingly glad, and commanded that Daniel be taken up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no kind of harm was found on him, because he had trusted in his God. And the king commanded, and those men who had maliciously accused Daniel were brought and cast into the den of lions—they, their children, and their wives. And before they reached the bottom of the den, the lions overpowered them and broke all their bones in pieces. Then King Darius wrote to all the peoples, nations, and languages that dwell in all the earth: "Peace be multiplied to you. I make a decree, that in all my royal dominion people are to tremble and fear before the God of Daniel, for he is the living God, enduring forever; his kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion shall be to the end. He delivers and rescues; he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth, he who has saved Daniel from the power of the lions." So this Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian. (Dan. 6:19-28)

TIMELINE

ESTHER RISKS IT ALL

God's providential work in the life of Esther.

HAMAN'S DOWNFALL

Haman's plot to destroy the Jews backfires.

NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER

God works through the prayers of His people.

As Darius came near to the lions' den he cried out for Daniel, wondering if he might still be alive. Suddenly, Daniel spoke, making it clear that no harm had come upon him. God had supernaturally intervened to shut the mouths of the lions, and Daniel made sure all who were present knew this truth. Daniel was brought out of the lions' den, and the king then sent those who maliciously accused Daniel to face the lions themselves.

We see how God used this entire story to show His greatness to the pagan world. Darius was clearly impacted by God's miraculous deliverance of Daniel. His declaration accomplishes at least two important purposes: It recognizes the greatness, even the superiority, of Israel's God; and it cancels out the irrevocable edict of verses 6-9. This is an amazing example of how God can even use unbelievers to proclaim His glory. As Proverbs 21:1 says, "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will."

- **Make a list of the attributes given to God in Darius' song. How is God's ultimate mission of receiving glory and honor from people of all nations revealed in this song?** (p. 36, PSG)

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Priesthood of the Believer (p. 36, PSG)

God's intention for humanity is that we be a kingdom of priests, not just a kingdom with priests. Although God set up the priestly system in the Old Testament due to the sinfulness of humanity and people's need for a mediator, His ultimate purpose is that we come to God directly, through the mediating work of Jesus Christ, thus eliminating the need of another priest. Because of the work of Christ on the cross (exemplified in His tearing down the curtain that prevented access into the holy of holies), Christians are free to approach God with boldness (Rom. 5:1-5; Heb. 4:14-16).

CHRIST CONNECTION

Throughout the Bible, the stories point us to a coming deliverer, a rescuer, in fulfillment of the first gospel promise in Genesis 3:15. Several events and people in God's Word ultimately point us to Christ. For example, the Passover in Exodus 12; the temple and the sacrificial system; and people like Adam, Abraham, Moses, David, and Daniel. In various ways, the Bible constantly points toward the coming King.

The 22nd Psalm in particular connects the Messiah to Daniel. In verse 21 the Righteous Sufferer proclaims, "Save me from the mouth of the lion!" God indeed saved Jesus from the mouth of the lion when He raised Him from the dead, just as He rescued Daniel. Praise God we can have courage as we follow a risen Savior!

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **What was it about Daniel's faith that made him a model servant? How does your faith impact the things you are involved in (school, sports, family life, etc.)?** *Answers will vary.*
- **When Daniel refused to obey the king's edict, what statement did it send to the rest of the world? What are some areas in our own culture in which we are called to obey God rather than men?** *Answers might include standing up for the right to life, taking care of orphans and the poor, fighting various forms of racism, and so forth.*
- **What role do you think Daniel's consistent practice of prayer had in shaping him to be the kind of man he was? How has your own personal prayer life given shape to the person you are today?** *Answers will vary.*
- **As with Daniel, how can we make sure God receives the glory for who He is and what He has done for us?** *Answers will vary.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

God chose to glorify Himself through miraculously saving Daniel in the lions' den. God used Daniel's trial and difficulties, however stressful they may have been to Daniel on a personal level, to point unbelievers to Himself. As a result, a pagan king witnessed the miraculous hand of God and publicly proclaimed God's greatness. In fact, Darius went so far as to say that God's kingdom would have no end and that He is without rival. This should automatically cause us to wonder how God is using our own trials and sufferings to make much of Himself.

- **Share about a time when God used a difficult period in your own life to point others to Himself.** *Answers will vary.*
- **How does this account give you a different perspective on personal trials, allowing you to step back and see the bigger picture of God's work?** *Answers will vary.*



HEART

This story teaches us once again that God honors those who remain faithful to Him. Just as he blessed and honored Daniel under the Babylonians, Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar, he did so again under the Medo-Persians and Darius (that is Cyrus the Persian). It is also worth noting, through all of these accounts, it appears that Daniel always sought to remain humble before God—in contrast to the earthly kings around him. As we know from Scripture, God opposes the proud, but gives grace to those who are humble (Jas. 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5).

- **In what ways are you intentionally seeking to live a life faithfully devoted to God? What does such a life look like?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What are some ways you can cultivate humility in your own life?** *First and foremost, humility begins with truly understanding God and His authority over our lives.*



HANDS

Even though it would have been a good time for Daniel to take a month off from being faithful to God, he persevered. From a worldly standpoint, Daniel's faithfulness wasn't personally convenient; however, obedience to and love for God was deeply ingrained in Daniel. He did not push his spiritual disciplines into the shadows of privacy. He had honored God in this manner the entire time He was in Babylon, and he would not stop now—not for a month, not even for a moment.

- **What are some spiritual disciplines you have intentionally tried to hide from others out of fear of what they might think or say?** *Answers may include things like prayer, Bible reading, sharing your faith with others, and so on.*
- **How does Daniel's faithfulness challenge you to live out your own faith in the presence of others?** *Answers will vary.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack item #6, containing an artistic poster of Daniel and the lions' den.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPWIN17Dan)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



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GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for **free online training** on how to lead a group visit

MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject



05

SESSION FIVE

God Brings His People Home

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we see how God kept His promise to bring His people out of exile and back to the promised land. As God's people gathered in Jerusalem, they made worshiping God their first priority and proclaimed God's faithfulness through their actions. As Christians, we celebrate and give thanks to God for bringing us out of our exile to sin and death. In our worship, we proclaim the goodness of the Lord so that others might taste and see that He is good.

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 1:1-8; 3:1-13

THE POINT

Worshiping God should be the first priority of His people.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Ask the students to talk about some ways they commonly celebrate victories with their teams, friends, families, or individually. We may celebrate by going out to dinner, taking a trip to a theme park, buying ice cream, or with tickets to see a concert or movie. We may have a celebratory dance or song. We all celebrate milestones and victories in different ways.

- **What are your favorite activities or places to go to celebrate?**

Worship is also a celebration of sorts—a celebration of who God is and what He has done for us. The Israelites got into trouble by celebrating the wrong things and making their own gods; that’s why they ended up in exile. But when God fulfilled His promise to bring them home, their first act was one of worship. True worship of the one true God.

- **In what situations is your first response to worship God? How is this a celebration of who God is or what He has done?**

Option 2

The first time you’re away from home can be scary, whether you’re on a beach trip with your best friend, heading out to camp for the summer, or spending a week on the mission field with your student ministry. No matter where you go, though, there is always the promise of home at the end of the week, the trip, or the summer.

- **What was the first trip you took without your parents? Where did you go? What did you do while you were there?**
- **Did you feel homesick or were you happy to have a break from “normal” life? How did you respond when it came time to return home?**

Though the Israelites’ exile certainly wasn’t like a vacation or summer camp, they anxiously awaited the day when God would fulfill His promise to bring them out of exile, to bring them home. Like we often do at the end of a long trip, they celebrated being home. But they celebrated differently—they celebrated by worshiping God.

- **How do you think you would react to returning home if you were an Israelite coming out of exile?**

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

Worshiping God should be the first priority of His people.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God** - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

PLOT

God made a promise to His people that one day they would leave their exile and return to the land of promise. In this session, we read about their return, as well as the long road to rebuilding what was destroyed.

TIMELINE

THE JOURNEY HOME

God keeps His promise to bring His people home.

REBUILDING THE TEMPLE

Despite immense opposition the temple is rebuilt.

ESTHER RISKS IT ALL

God's providential work in the life of Esther.

GOD SENT THE ISRAELITES HOME

The first six chapters of Ezra highlight God's sovereignty in the preservation of His people. God brought His chosen people, Israel, back into the land of promise. What's more, He used the ruler of the nation to accomplish His purposes.

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

After years of living in exile, the people of God were sovereignly given free passage to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. God moved within the heart of the king to not only allow His people to return and rebuild the temple, but to also provide the finances for their mission. The king encouraged people to give a voluntary gift to the Israelites as they returned, much like the type of offerings we are called to give today.

- **When have you witnessed God using unlikely people, like the pagan king here, to provide for His people? Explain.** (p. 40, PSG)

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

Jeremiah's prophecy, referred to and fulfilled in these verses, is an often quoted passage from Jeremiah 29:10-11, "For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."

In contemporary Christianity, these verses are often used to encourage individual believers with the reality that God's sovereign hand holds their future. In its context, this passage is far more meaningful than a message for the individual because it depicts God's faithfulness to the whole Israelite community. God's plan would ultimately result in the Messiah's coming, and through His resurrection would come the redemption of all that was lost in the fall of Genesis 3. The same God who kept His promise to Israel is the God who protects our future.

THE PEOPLE JOURNEYED BACK TO JERUSALEM AND WORSHIPED GOD

Consider the scene as these exiles returned to their land. The Lord had not been worshiped in Jerusalem in fifty years, since the city's fall. So, it's not surprising that the first concern of the community was to lift up name of the Lord, even though the temple was not fully constructed. Watch what happened:

When the seventh month came, and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem. Then arose Jeshua the son of Jozadak, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel with his kinsmen, and they built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the Law of Moses the man of God. They set the altar in its place, for fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands, and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening. And they kept the Feast of Booths, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number according to the rule, as each day required, and after that the regular burnt offerings, the offerings at the new moon and at all the appointed feasts of the LORD, and the offerings of everyone who made a freewill offering to the LORD. From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD. But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid. So they gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the Sidonians and the Tyrians to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa, according to the grant that they had from Cyrus king of Persia. (Ezra 3:1-7)

While the people of God fully intended to rebuild the temple, they knew a physical temple wasn't a requirement to worship God. Before the temple's grand re-opening, even before all of the once familiar things were restored in Jerusalem, the people simply worshiped God with a cheerful heart.

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE BEGAN

Worship is at the center of life in the community of faith. In the Jews' return to Jerusalem, their worship highlighted God's goodness to His people for allowing them to return and reconstruct the temple. Notice the multifaceted nature of their worship and how it exalted the Lord.

Now in the second year after their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak made a beginning, together with the rest of their kinsmen, the priests and the Levites and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity. They appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to supervise the work of the house of the LORD. And Jeshua with his sons and his brothers, and Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, together supervised the workmen in the house of God, along with the sons of Henadad and the Levites, their sons and brothers. And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the directions of David king of Israel. And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel." And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away. (Ezra 3:8-13)

The people gathered together to celebrate the new foundation that was in place for the temple. However, the primary purpose of their gathering was to worship God, the One the temple points to.

It would be easy to think that those who wept were doing so for nostalgic reasons—they remembered the original temple in all of its glory and were sad over the fact that it no longer stood. However, the way the passage reads points to another way of looking at these tears—tears of gladness. Yes, there may be some sadness in their hearts because of their affiliation with the first temple. But the tears they cried when they saw the new foundation were tears of joy; in light of all

TIMELINE

HAMAN'S DOWNFALL

Haman's plot to destroy the Jews backfires.

NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER

God works through the prayers of His people.

THE WALL IS REBUILT

God restores the surrounding wall.

that had happened to them, God was faithful during all of the years in exile. God kept His promise to bring them back home. And they stood at the site of the new temple foundation, seeing with their own eyes the real and tangible grace of God in their lives.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Preservation of Scripture (p. 42, PSG)

God has chosen to reveal Himself to humanity through the text of Scripture, having inspired it and directed it to be free from error. God has also acted providentially throughout the course of history to ensure the biblical text is faithfully preserved for future generations. Our belief in the preservation of Scripture is supported by investigation into how the canon of Scripture was formed, and how manuscripts were faithfully transmitted throughout the centuries.

CHRIST CONNECTION

The primary task of these chapters in Ezra is to tell of the reconstruction of the temple, but the significance of this book points forward to the cross and to Jesus' return. God kept His promise to bring His people out of exile in Babylon and restore their freedom to worship Him. Since Adam and Eve sinned, all humans have been in exile from the garden and are in need of deliverance. Jesus came to end this exile, bring His people home, and restore our freedom to worship. This directs our attention to a time when He will ultimately rule and reign unopposed in His kingdom.

YOUR STORY 10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **God's promise of return was fulfilled under His sovereign direction after 50 years of exile. What does this say about the importance of waiting on the Lord and relying on His timing?** *God's timetable for fulfilling His promises may be different from our own. Where our view of what He is doing is limited, God sees the big picture and is working all things together according to His good and perfect plan.*
- **The people voluntarily gave of their resources for the construction of the temple. How is the giving of our resources an act of worship?** *The giving of our resources can show what or who it is we truly value. A good parent who gives good gifts to his children does so because he values them. Likewise, when we give to the church or when we give to those on the mission field, we are communicating that we value the work that is being done for the Kingdom. And in that sense, giving becomes worship.*
- **What does this account teach us about worshiping God?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What does this account teach us about outward displays of worship?** *While worship is primarily a thing of the heart, true worship will manifest itself in some way outwardly, from an act of tithing to persistently living differently from the world.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

In this account, it can be easy to overlook the fact that the Israelites worshiped according to the Law of Moses. The Law (the first five books of the Bible) gave God's people clear warnings about worshipping Him in the same way the surrounding nations worshiped their gods. The purpose of this warning was to not only redirect Israel toward distinct and holy living, but also for the simple purpose of demonstrating the better way of the God of Israel.

- **Why is it important that Christianity not blend in with the surrounding culture?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What are some ways Christians can communicate living a better way to our surrounding culture today?** *Answers will vary.*



HEART

As these chapters showed, neither experiencing the presence of God nor the opportunity to worship Him are attached to a geographical location. This reality is further emphasized in the New Testament as Christ followers are said to be the very temple of God by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in them (1 Cor. 3:16-17; Eph. 4:30). Worship is first and foremost an issue of the heart—an internal joy and satisfaction in who God is and what He has done. Because of that, all of life is worship, offering us moments to take joy in God even in the smallest tasks of our day.

- **What are the dangers in thinking that worship is something that only takes place during a church service?** *Answers will vary.*
- **If worship is primarily of the heart, how has your worship been lately? Are you currently finding satisfaction and joy in God? If not, why do you think that is the case?** *Answers will vary.*



HANDS

We learn from these chapters that both young and old people lifted praises to God with various expressions and from different stages of life. Not only that, but those praises produced a unified sound that glorified the Lord and could be heard from far away. Thus, far from being an event designed for only one generation, we see all of God's people united in proclaiming the goodness of God to those around them. Such demonstration is a powerful witness to the world.

- **Have you built relationships with older people in your church? Why or why not?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Why is it important for younger Christians to build relationships with older Christians? What are the dangers of never having older Christians who speak into your life?** *It is important because without those relationships, you won't be able to benefit from the collective wisdom from the church as a whole.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack items #7 and #8. The first one contains an informational poster on several of God's promises found in Scripture. Feel free to use this as a talking point with your students, asking them which of God's promises found on this poster, or elsewhere throughout Scripture, has been particularly encouraging for them personally. The second pack item contains an exile and return map that can be used in this session (and others that follow) to chart the geographical path of the Israelites on their journey home.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPWIN17Dan)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



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GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for **free online training** on how to lead a group visit

MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject

06

SESSION SIX

The Rebuilding of the Temple

SESSION SUMMARY

The exiles had returned to their homeland, but this was only the beginning of the rebuilding process. As they obeyed God in restoring the temple, they faced opposition and adversity. By choosing to listen to God's Word and not the opposition, they were able to complete the work God called them to do, and they celebrated His work through them. As God's people today, we are called to remain faithful to the task God has laid before us and to trust Him to transform hearts and lives, no matter what adversity we encounter.

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 4:1-7; 5:1-5; 6:13-22

THE POINT

God is able to transform hearts and minds to accomplish His will.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Established in 1630, Boston, MA was not designed for the automobile. Due to the traffic congestion in Boston's tangled streets, the Massachusetts Department of Public Works proposed an expressway system that would run through and around the city to alleviate the congestion on Boston's overcrowded freeways. After the initial demolition to clear space for the interstate in Boston's historic districts, city planners faced opposition from residents, and the building project was suspended in 1972.

The "traffic crisis" in metropolitan Boston shows us just how hard it is to work through various avenues to construct something of value. Problems and setbacks occur regularly in this kind of work.

We saw in the previous session how the exiles began returning to Jerusalem and laid the foundation for a new temple. In this session, we see the problems they ran into while trying to reconstruct the temple. How would God's people endure adversity as they sought to restore the temple?

- **When have you been involved in "building" or "constructing" something—either literally (a school project, etc.) or metaphorically (a ministry, school club, etc.)? What problems did you encounter in the process?**

Option 2

If you play sports, are part of a debate team, or participate in any type of competition you know this: There is always an opponent. In team sports, the teams not only build a solid offense to win games, but they also create and implement defensive strategies to keep the other team from success. Sometimes they each cover one opponent, and other times defensive players split into zones around the ball's current position. Either way, their goal is to keep the other team from scoring.

When the Israelites returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, they faced opponents of a different kind—those who didn't want them to be successful in rebuilding. For a time, the Israelites were discouraged and the building stopped. But God sent His prophets to encourage His people to carry out His mission and rebuild. God sustained them even though they faced opposition and adversity.

- **Describe a situation in which you faced opposition. How did God sustain you?**

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God is able to transform hearts and minds to accomplish His will.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God** - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

PLOT

The road home for the Jewish people was filled with difficulties. The first of these came about with their attempts to rebuild the temple, the center of their way of life. By choosing to listen to God's Word instead of the opposition, they were able to complete the work God called them to do. Then, they celebrated because God completed this great work through them.

TIMELINE

REBUILDING THE TEMPLE

Despite immense opposition the temple is rebuilt.

ESTHER RISKS IT ALL

God's providential work in the life of Esther.

HAMAN'S DOWNFALL

Haman's plot to destroy the Jews backfires.

THE PEOPLE FACED OPPOSITION WITH THE REBUILDING OF THE TEMPLE

In the previous session, we learned that the exiled Jews were returning in waves to Jerusalem, where they began the process of laying a foundation for a new temple. The Jews had permission to rebuild, but they still faced opposition, and this opposition took on two forms. Let's take a look.

Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the LORD, the God of Israel, they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of fathers' houses and said to them, "Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria who brought us here." But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of fathers' houses in Israel said to them, "You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the LORD, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us." Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build and bribed counselors against them to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia. And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. In the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam and Mithredath and Tabeel and the rest of their associates wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia. The letter was written in Aramaic and translated. (Ezra 4:1-7)

The first sign of opposition the Jews faced came from their surrounding neighbors. These surrounding neighbors banded together and sought to prevent the people from building the temple. But why would they do that, especially in light of the fact that they offered a helping hand to build the temple alongside the Jews?

The reason the Jews declined their help was due to the simple reason that even though these neighbors made sacrifices to God, they didn't worship Him alone—they also worshiped the false gods in their pantheon. These returning Jews knew the history of their people all too well—how they would be drawn away from God because they participated in the idolatry of the surrounding nations. Having learned their lesson about falling into idolatry and risking God's judgment and discipline once more, the Jews decided that they alone would build the temple. This was their way of saying that the Lord alone was God and no other "god" would be worshiped with this new temple.

By making this faithful stand on their convictions, the Jews created a ripple effect—many consequences came their way. The outside opposing forces were not only offended that the Jews declined their help, but they also sought to create internal opposition for them by bribing officials and community leaders in hopes of frustrating work on the temple.

- **What are some ways you can guard your mind from idol worship? How can you make sure your worship is not influenced by those idols?**
(p. 47, PSG)

GOD'S PEOPLE LISTENED TO GOD'S WORD

As we pick up the story in chapter 5, we fast forward through history and discover that the rebuilding of the temple was impeded, and then stopped for about sixteen years. Much like other moves of God from the time of Abraham to the Book of Acts, revitalizing the temple was jump-started with a word from the Lord through the prophets.

Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them. Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God that is in Jerusalem, and the prophets of God were with them, supporting them. At the same time Tattenai the governor of the province Beyond the River and Shethar-bozenai and their associates came to them and spoke to them thus: “Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?” They also asked them this: “What are the names of the men who are building this building?” But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until the report should reach Darius and then an answer be returned by letter concerning it. (Ezra 5:1-5)

God used two prophets, Haggai and Zachariah, to rebuke and exhort God’s people who were in desperate need of encouragement. The prophets’ mission was to bring about spiritual renewal and to motivate the people to restore proper worship of the Lord.

The prophetic message was clear: When God and His work are neglected, He removes His blessing and the people and community become spiritually malnourished.

As we see the opposition to the Jews in verses 3-5, we learn how important it is to be attuned to God’s Word when we encounter words of discouragement. We must cultivate disciplines that focus God’s people upon His words and not the words of those who oppose us.

True to His Word, God continued to work in spite of the danger of sending the builders’ names to Darius. God even worked through a communication delay to fulfill His purposes (a simple report would have taken four to five months to reach King Darius). Although Tattenai could have stopped the work during the correspondence with the King, Ezra highlighted God’s intervention that allowed the work to continue.

THE TEMPLE WAS FINALLY REBUILT

Ezra 6 culminated in celebration. First of all, King Darius ordered the governor not to stop Israel from rebuilding the temple. He also ordered him to pay for the construction expenses out of the royal treasury. The king demanded that those who opposed their work be punished. God utilized the proclamation of the prophets, the king's decrees, and the willing hearts of the people to bring about His will.

Then, according to the word sent by Darius the king, Tattenai, the governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their associates did with all diligence what Darius the king had ordered. And the elders of the Jews built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. They finished their building by decree of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia; and this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king. And the people of Israel, the priests and the Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy. They offered at the dedication of this house of God 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel 12 male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel. And they set the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their divisions, for the service of God at Jerusalem, as it is written in the Book of Moses. On the fourteenth day of the first month, the returned exiles kept the Passover. For the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together; all of them were clean. So they slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the returned exiles, for their fellow priests, and for themselves. It was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile, and also by every one who had joined them and separated himself from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land to worship the LORD, the God of Israel. And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the LORD had made them joyful and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel. (Ezra 6:13-22)

On March 12, 515 B. C., the celebration began—four years after the work was renewed and twenty years after the efforts began (Ezra 3:8). The completion of the temple was nearly 70 years after Solomon's temple fell in 586 B. C., just as Jeremiah prophesied (Jer. 25:12–14; 29:10).

The celebrations that followed the construction were a vital part of living as the people of God—there were occasions of fellowship, worship, and of glorifying God. In essence, these days of celebration helped God's people remember His saving acts from generation to generation.

TIMELINE

NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER

God works through the prayers of His people.

THE WALL IS REBUILT

God restores the surrounding wall.

THE CENTRALITY OF THE WORD

The people gather to hear God's Word.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Inerrancy of Scripture (p. 47, PSG)

Inerrancy refers to the belief that the Scripture is completely truthful, without any mixture of error in all its teachings, no matter what subject it addresses. Believing the Scriptures to be inerrant does not preclude the biblical authors' inclusion of observations from a human observer, the use of round numbers, unusual grammatical constructions, or varying perspectives on a particular event. It does mean, however, that Scripture is an infallible guide to salvation and that it is truthful in all that it affirms (Matt. 5:18; John 10:35; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18).

CHRIST CONNECTION

Believers can rest on the truth that God will see His plan come to fruition. He will sustain His people during times of adversity. What's more, we know we have a God who did not exclude Himself from facing difficulty and suffering. Christ faced temptation and opposition as He obeyed the Father in all things.

Now, through Christ's example and by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are empowered to obey God no matter what circumstances or trials we face. God calls believers to continue in obedience despite the words of our opponents. He calls us to trust Him to change the hearts and minds of those who oppose Him and our faith.

YOUR STORY 10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **What kind of opposition or adversity comes against obedient Christians today? What do we learn from the exiles' response to opposition?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What are the warning signs of someone with spiritual apathy?** *Signs might include unrepentant sin, avoiding Christian accountability, lack of prayer, a hardened heart to the things of God, and so forth.*
- **What role does Scripture play in helping us overcome this apathy in our own lives?** *The Holy Spirit uses the Word of God to awaken our spiritual taste buds. The Word is capable of not only convicting us of where we have gone astray, but is also able to awaken our affections for the things of God.*
- **How has this session challenged you when it comes to dealing with opposition to your faith in your own life?** *Answers will vary.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION

10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

A parallel passage to this account can be found in the Book of Haggai. Haggai admonished the people for their neglect of God's house because their attention had shifted away from the things of God to their own personal wellbeing. In essence, Haggai lamented that the people lived in fine homes while the temple lay in ruins (Hag. 1:3-6). This happens when spiritual apathy sets in—we neglect the things of God in pursuit of the things of this world.

- **What are some earthly comforts that can distract you from following God's will?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How can Christians guard themselves from falling for such distractions?** *Answers will vary.*



HEART

One of the things we learn from this account is how the Word of God is able to turn people back to God in repentance. When apathy set in on account of the opposition, it took a word from God through the mouths of the prophets for the people to realign their priorities. They went from being concerned only about earthly possessions and securities to doing the will of God, resulting in a renewed sense of purpose and devotion to Him.

- **How has the Word of God reshaped the priorities in your own life?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Why should Christians turn their attention to God's Word when battling against spiritual apathy?** *Answers will vary.*



HANDS

In a society where tolerance and openness are seen as absolute values, Christians face the ever-present danger of compromising their beliefs. We are pressured to minimize the differences between Christianity and other faiths, as if all religious beliefs are basically the same. But this jumbled thinking provides an opportunity for us to do two things simultaneously: We demonstrate our love for those who we believe to be in error, and we are passionate in upholding the Word of God.

- **Why do you think Christians find it difficult to do these things simultaneously?** *As with most things in life, we tend to fall to the extreme on one side over the other. We want to be faithful to Scripture, while at the same time lovingly speak the truth of Scripture into the lives of others.*
- **Share about a time when you showed love by graciously speaking truth into the life of someone who was in sin. What was the result?** *Answers will vary.*

▶ ADDITIONAL INFO

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPWIN17Dan)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



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07

SESSION SEVEN

Esther (Part I)

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we look at the first part of Esther's story. Esther teaches us how to seek the Lord even through those seasons of life when His hand of providence seems to be hidden. Like Esther, we have to see ourselves as playing a role in God's sovereign plan for the world. Esther's story gives us the courage to accept the risk of following God, no matter the cost. As God's people, we are to find and fulfill our purpose today—for such a time as this—a purpose that must align with God's greater plan to bring salvation to the ends of the earth.

SCRIPTURE

Esther 4

THE POINT

The Lord is working His plan even when we cannot see Him.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Have you ever experienced a time when it seemed like God was absent? When it seemed His voice went quiet? When it felt like He had abandoned you or forgotten you? Have you ever been tempted to question God's goodness in the face of tragedy, personal failure, or grief?

Sometimes life makes us question what God is up to, or if He is up to anything at all. Our past experiences, our emotional confusion, and our challenging circumstances all conspire to make God seem inaccessible. Sometimes our circumstances make it seem almost like God is hiding.

The Book of Esther, written thousands of years ago, tells of a time when God's people were living under an oppressive regime, asking many of the questions suffering people ask today. The narrative contains all the elements of a Hollywood screenplay—political intrigue, violence, and the underdog who overcomes all the odds to “win” in the end. But Esther is more than just a history lesson. This book shows us the providential care of God for His people, even when He appears to be absent.

- **What kinds of hardships and struggles are most likely to make you question God's care over this world? What circumstances have you faced that led to this kind of questioning?**

Option 2

What happens when we fail to follow instructions? Maybe we make a lower grade, lose privileges, get “grounded,” lose a game, or hurt someone we love. If we obey, maybe we risk losing friendships or popularity, but if we don't obey the consequences are far greater.

- **When have you taken a risk to obey? When have you seen negative consequences in your life when you failed to obey?**

Esther faced a similar situation. As we will see momentarily, Esther had a difficult choice before her, one that could cost her very life. However, as we will see, God placed Esther exactly where He wanted her for that moment in time. He does the same with us today.

- **Where has God placed you to serve for the time being? How do you see Him working through you in that situation?**

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

The Lord is working His plan even when we cannot see Him.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God** - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Esther** - raised by her cousin Mordecai, Esther was a young Jewish girl who was forced to marry a Persian King
- **Hamaan** - a trusted advisor to the king; hated the Jewish people and plotted to have them all exterminated

PLOT

In this session, we look at the first part of Esther's story. Esther teaches us how to seek the Lord even through those seasons of life when His hand of providence seems to be hidden.

TIMELINE

ESTHER RISKS IT ALL

God's providential work in the life of Esther.

HAMAN'S DOWNFALL

Haman's plot to destroy the Jews backfires.

NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER

God works through the prayers of His people.

GOD'S PEOPLE FACED EXTINCTION

In our journey through the Bible, we have seen how the Babylonian and Assyrian empires took God's people into exile. As the Persian Empire spread across the world, it became more and more difficult for God's people to maintain their Jewish identity. There were many Jews who questioned or lost their faith during these times. But God had promised to maintain a remnant of His people, and so faithful Jews passed down their heritage and faith to new generations of children.

Esther was one such child. She was an orphan—raised by her cousin Mordecai. In addition to her difficult family situation, Esther belonged to an immigrant family, which means she was part of a religious, racial, and cultural minority. The dominant culture in Persia was so unfriendly to Jews that Mordecai and Esther felt the need to hide their cultural identity. Esther knew what it meant to be an outsider.

Esther was taken from Mordecai as a young girl. Selected for her physical beauty and exploited by King Xerxes, the world's most powerful ruler at the time, she was forced into marriage to a violent and unstable man.

One of Xerxes' closest advisers, Hamaan, hated Mordecai and he hated the Jews. He disliked their ethnicity, their culture, and their religious beliefs. Hamaan convinced the king that the resistance of some Jews to embrace Persian culture was a threat to the Persian way of life. So he used his proximity to the king to goad him into signing an edict that called for the extermination of the Jewish people throughout the Persian Empire. The date was set when the Persian military and citizenry would be mobilized to kill Jews in every city and province in the kingdom (Esth. 3:8-13).

When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and he cried out with a loud and bitter cry. He went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one was allowed to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth. And in every province, wherever the king's command and his decree reached, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and many of them lay in sackcloth and ashes. When Esther's young women and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed. She sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what this was and why it was. Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, and Mordecai

told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. (Esth. 4:1-7)

Mordecai, Esther, and the Jewish people faced certain doom. There appeared to be no way out and no way to change their circumstances. They grieved and agonized for themselves and their people. Yet God had a plan, and they all had a part to play.

When Mordecai received the news of the king's order to kill the Jews, he was understandably upset. Even though he was a man of faith, Mordecai did not choose to live in denial concerning the dangerous situation he and his people were in. As word began to spread about the coming genocide, the Jewish people throughout Persia awakened to the coming threat.

Most likely, none of the Jews living in the provinces surrounding the Persian capital of Susa had ever been to Israel. They had never seen the temple, or the palace in Jerusalem, and they had never set foot in the promised land. But even in this time of crisis, God's people were determined to seek after Him.

- **When have you felt like an “outsider” because of your faith? How do you respond in these situations?** (*p. 54, PSG*)

MORDECAI BELIEVED IN GOD'S SOVEREIGN PLAN FOR DELIVERANCE

Mordecai hoped that Esther would rely on her position to seek protection for their people. Mordecai recognized the role he had in God's plan to preserve His people, and he recognized the role Esther might have as well.

Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther and explain it to her and command her to go to the king to beg his favor and plead with him on behalf of her people. And Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. Then Esther spoke to Hathach and commanded him to go to Mordecai and say, “All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—to be put to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter so that he may live. But as for me, I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days.” And they told Mordecai what Esther had said. Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, “Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (Esth. 4:8-14)

Throughout the Bible, God’s sovereignty is displayed alongside the actions of people. In other words, God works in and through meaningful human choices to accomplish His purposes. The same principle is woven throughout Esther’s account. Neither Esther nor Mordecai attained their positions of access to political power by accident. God put them there on purpose. Even though God had “appointed” Esther to be queen, she still had to make a personal choice to exercise faith and courage in order to fulfill her part in God’s plan. This was her “defining moment” as an individual, and her choices carried massive consequences that extend far beyond what she could possibly imagine. Her life was at stake, but so was the fate of Jewish people everywhere.

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

What would have happened if Esther had failed the test? Would her disobedience have crippled God’s ability to carry out His rescue plan for His people? No, because God’s promise to preserve His people did not depend on Esther. That’s why Mordecai had faith that God would intervene by some other method if Esther did not step up. Even so, Esther did not shrink back—she did not fail the test. And God used her in a powerful way.

ESTHER RISKED HER LIFE FOR THE SAKE OF HER PEOPLE

What did Esther choose to do? She sent her reply back to Mordecai.

Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, “Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.” Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him. (Esth. 4:15-17)

Esther was willing to risk it all for the sake of her people. Now, we’d like to think that God’s people always win. After all David took a risk, but God helped him, and he killed Goliath. Elijah risked his life, but God showed up and humiliated the false prophets of Baal. Gideon took risks, as did Samson, Jehoshaphat, Daniel, Deborah, and many other great people of the Bible. All of them turned out to be winners like Esther. We like telling those stories after we know that God came through.

But do we adequately contemplate the reality of what those men and women, both young and old, were facing? Do we forget the fact they didn’t know the end of the story? The fear, the doubts, the shaky faith, the urge to turn back—those feelings were as real for them as they often are for us.

TIMELINE

THE WALL IS REBUILT

God restores the surrounding wall.

THE CENTRALITY OF THE WORD

The people gather to hear God’s Word.

SHALLOW WORSHIP

The people fail to give God their very best.

If we choose to go all in with God—to follow Him no matter what the cost—we have to acknowledge the possibility of real loss. When we read the Bible we also see the stories of Stephen (stoned to death), the prophets (ignored, marginalized, killed), the disciples (mostly martyred), and Jesus (crucified).

Like Esther, many of us have had tough experiences. But God has a way of taking everything we are—our personalities, our experiences, our gifts and talents, our “baggage,” our hopes, our faith—and redeeming it all. Jesus died on the cross and was raised from the dead so that God could take broken people like us and make us useful for Him. We can know that nothing in our background or our present circumstances is outside of the sovereign power of God. He is always working, even when we can’t see Him (Rom. 8:28).

And while we trust God’s commitment to keep all of His promises, we still bear a responsibility to participate in His redemptive plan for this world and the people in it. Obedience matters. God *could* execute His purposes without our help, but He *won’t*. He chooses to use us to accomplish His plans (Eph. 2:10).

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

God’s Providence (p. 55, PSG)

Providence refers to God’s continuing work and involvement in His creation. This includes, in various degrees, God’s preservation of the created order, His governance, and His care for His people (Gen. 8:21-22; Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3). Christians believe the world, and even the cosmos itself, is contingent upon God, incapable of existing apart from Him. Christians also believe in God’s personal and direct intervention in the world—as opposed to a hands-off approach to creation—that affects not only the natural order, but also the individuals and events within human history.

CHRIST CONNECTION

In the next session, we will pick up the story and see what happened to Esther and Mordecai. For now, we must stop and marvel at the beauty of this story. God, although not mentioned in this book, is the great Author who wove together this story through the extraordinary lives of these people. The same Author who told this story is the one who later sent His Son “in the fullness of time”—for such a time as this—to lose His own life for the sake of the world. The same Author who sent His Son now lives in you by His Spirit, and He is weaving all your past circumstances and your present position together to be part of His great plan of bringing people from every tribe, tongue, and nation around His throne.

YOUR STORY 10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **Share about a time in your own life when God seemed distant during a difficult situation. What happened?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How can we encourage each other to seek the Lord when His hand of providence is hidden from our view?** *We can remind each other of stories like this where we see God at work in the midst of difficult circumstances.*
- **What are some aspects of your past that you've seen God use to make you more effective in serving Him?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What are some examples of people taking risks to follow Christ? When have you had to risk your own welfare in doing what God called you to do?** *Answers will vary.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

In many ways the Book of Esther resembles our lives. We may find it hard to identify with the miraculous “God-encounters” of Abraham or Moses. We haven’t seen fire fall from the sky like Elijah. We haven’t killed a giant in battle like David. But many of us have felt marginalized and forgotten like Esther. And because of that, her life story shows us that in the midst of the chaotic, difficult, and overwhelming circumstances of life, we are not alone. God is there with power and a plan and a part for us to play.

- **In what ways is Esther’s story similar to your own?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How does her story strengthen your confidence that God is near and cares for you?**
Answers will vary.



HEART

Like Esther, perhaps you too have found yourself overcome with grief or overwhelmed by terrible circumstances. When we cannot see what God is doing, we may begin to question if He is paying attention. But He is there. Instead of dwelling on doubts and questions, we should call out to the great God whom we trust is there, even when He seems to be hidden.

- **Have you ever heard someone say they don’t “feel” God’s presence? Why is it dangerous to rely solely upon our feelings in answering the question of God’s closeness?** *Because we are fallen individuals who live in a fallen world, our feelings can deceive us and lead us away from truth. This is why our faith doesn’t rest upon a personal “feeling,” but upon the work of Jesus on our behalf.*
- **What are some examples in Scripture that you can point to for encouragement when wondering if God is near?** *Examples would include Elijah, David, Paul, and even Jesus Himself.*



HANDS

Have you ever felt insignificant? Have you ever doubted that God could use you? It’s likely that Esther felt that way. But God had orchestrated the events of her life—even the sad, tragic, and terrible moments—so that she would be in a position to make a difference for His sake. The Bible indicates that God is doing the same in all of our lives. God is weaving the events of our lives—even the difficult and painful parts—to prepare us and position us for usefulness in His kingdom. Yet we still have to make real choices that really matter. And our decision to be obedient, faithful, and to seize our defining moments can have ripples and consequences far beyond what we can see or imagine.

- **Who are some other people throughout history whose life circumstances and position made it possible for them to change the world?** *Answers will vary.*
- **When have you felt like you were put somewhere “for such a time as this” to do God’s will?** *Answers will vary.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack item #9, which contains a quote poster from one of the Bible passages in this session.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPWIN17Dan)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
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08

SESSION EIGHT

Esther (Part II)

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we continue the story of Esther, in which God's good purposes for His people led to a radical reversal. The humble were exalted, those who were condemned received salvation, and those expected to suffer defeat triumphed in victory. When we read God's Word, we are reminded that God is often at work to bring about His purposes even when His people do not realize what He is doing. God calls us to look beyond earthly appearances and strength and to honor and trust Him for final victory.

SCRIPTURE

Esther 6:6-11; 7:3-10; 9:1-2

THE POINT

God calls us to look beyond what we can see and trust in Him for deliverance.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Have you ever looked back on circumstances in your life, only to realize God was at work behind the scenes to bring about His will? Sometimes, you realize that God used a painful event or suffering to bring about good (Rom. 8:28). Other times, you realize that your good fortunes were nothing more than the grace of God poured out on your behalf, to accomplish His purposes for His glory (2 Cor. 2:8-9).

Life's various circumstances provide an abundance of opportunities to deepen our trust in the providence of God, regardless of the situations we may face. Sometimes it helps to encounter a biblical example of God's providence to remind us that He does work behind the scenes to accomplish His will. This is exactly what we've seen in the Book of Esther.

- **It has been said, "God is too good to be unkind and He is too wise to be mistaken. And when we cannot trace His hand, we must trust His heart." Have you ever felt like God was making a mistake regarding the circumstances of your life? If so, how did you handle that feeling? What events in your life have deepened your trust in God's wisdom?**

Option 2

Movies and TV shows often have "Behind the Scenes" features, in which they introduce the audience to the actors, the set, and maybe a blooper reel. Going behind the scenes of a movie places the audience in the role of the creator, who can see how the movie was made. They know the theme of the movie, the outtakes, and the ridiculous lengths producers, actors, and the film crew had to go in order to capture that perfect shot.

- **Have you ever watched "Behind the Scenes" on a movie? What is one interesting thing you learned from that experience?**

When we watch movies, we only see the end result. In the same way, there are parts of our lives that we don't see, things set in motion in God's plan that don't always make sense to us. Sometimes, we might wish for a "Behind the Scenes" reel of our own lives, but if we trust in God, we will see His plan woven throughout the finished product.

- **Have you ever experienced something you didn't understand at the time, but looking back you were able to see God's purpose in that situation?**

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God calls us to look beyond what we can see and trust in Him for deliverance.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God** - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Esther** - raised by her cousin Mordecai, Esther was a young Jewish girl who was forced to marry a Persian King
- **Hamaan** - a trusted advisor to the king; hated the Jewish people and plotted to have them all exterminated

PLOT

As we continue in the Book of Esther, we wrap up a story that is all about God's good purposes for His people, as seen in the radical change of events surrounding Esther and Mordecai.

TIMELINE

HAMAN'S DOWNFALL

Haman's plot to destroy the Jews backfires.

NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER

God works through the prayers of His people.

THE WALL IS REBUILT

God restores the surrounding wall.

HAMAN'S PLAN AGAINST MORDECAI BACKFIRED

While the Book of Esther doesn't explicitly refer to God, the unfolding events in this story seem to be more than remarkable coincidences. In chapter 6, God's hand clearly moved on behalf of His people to bring about His will.

Esther, an orphaned Jewish maiden, was exalted from humble beginnings to the lofty position to queen of the Persian Empire (Esth. 2:1-18), much like Joseph in Genesis 37-45. A Jewish man by the name of Mordecai, who was Esther's uncle and adoptive guardian, providentially intercepted a plot to assassinate King Ahasuerus (Esth. 2:19-22). From the beginning of the narrative, the situation looked favorable for the Jewish people.

But that picture was quickly overshadowed by the evil intent of a man named Haman, one of the king's officials who had decided to annihilate the Jewish people (Esth. 3:1-15). Let's pick up the story and see how Haman, who wanted to humiliate Mordecai, was forced to honor him instead.

So Haman came in, and the king said to him, "What should be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?" And Haman said to himself, "Whom would the king delight to honor more than me?" And Haman said to the king, "For the man whom the king delights to honor, let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn, and the horse that the king has ridden, and on whose head a royal crown is set. And let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble officials. Let them dress the man whom the king delights to honor, and let them lead him on the horse through the square of the city, proclaiming before him: 'Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.'" Then the king said to Haman, "Hurry; take the robes and the horse, as you have said, and do so to Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Leave out nothing that you have mentioned." So Haman took the robes and the horse, and he dressed Mordecai and led him through the square of the city, proclaiming before him, "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor." (Esth. 6:6-11)

Realizing that he had not honored Mordecai for spoiling the plot against his death, the king decided to reward him. He inquired about who, in the court, might be able to give this reward. Of course, it was none other than murderous Haman, who "happened" to enter the court to ask for permission to hang Mordecai. But God was about to thwart his plans and deliver the Jews from his hands. The way these events moved in favor of Esther and Mordecai made God's providence in the situation undeniable.

HAMAN WAS SENTENCED TO DEATH

Humiliation and exaltation were reversed between Haman and Mordecai. Next, this account demonstrated the reversal of judgment and salvation, as Esther once again made a bold request of the king.

Queen Esther answered, “If I have obtained your approval, my king, and if the king is pleased, spare my life—this is my request; and spare my people—this is my desire. For my people and I have been sold out to destruction, death, and extermination. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept silent. Indeed, the trouble wouldn’t be worth burdening the king.” King Ahasuerus spoke up and asked Queen Esther, “Who is this, and where is the one who would devise such a scheme?” Esther answered, “The adversary and enemy is this evil Haman.” Haman stood terrified before the king and queen. Angered by this, the king arose from where they were drinking wine and went to the palace garden. Haman remained to beg Queen Esther for his life because he realized the king was planning something terrible for him. Just as the king returned from the palace garden to the house of wine drinking, Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was reclining. The king exclaimed, “Would he actually violate the queen while I am in the palace?” As soon as the statement left the king’s mouth, Haman’s face was covered. Harbona, one of the royal eunuchs, said: “There is a gallows 75 feet tall at Haman’s house that he made for Mordecai, who gave the report that saved the king.” The king commanded, “Hang him on it.” They hanged Haman on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the king’s anger subsided. (Esth. 7:3-10)

Esther risked it all, this time to save her people. Esther had to make a choice: to act or not to act. Esther decided to act and respectfully appealed to King Ahasuerus on behalf of Israel, revealing that she was of Jewish descent. Moreover, without naming the perpetrator, she uncovered a treacherous plan to annihilate her people.

The king interrupted and wanted to know who had the audacity to do such a thing. Esther revealed that it was Haman. Not only was Haman a traitor to the king, he was also an enemy of the Jews. Once the King knew Esther was Jewish, it became clear that Haman had also inadvertently threatened her life.

At that point, Haman was terrified, and rightfully so. He intended to execute his own judgment against the people of God, but God would deliver them from his hand. When Haman realized that he was caught, he desperately sought a way out, but his fate was sealed.

Haman’s death sentence was an ironic example of poetic justice—he was hung on the gallows he set up for Mordecai. Haman’s evil intentions were thwarted by the sovereign providence of God.

- **Read and consider Proverbs 5:22. How was this truth reflected in Haman's life? How does this Proverb serve as a warning for us when it comes to entertaining personal sins in our own lives? (p. 61, PSG)**

GOD'S PEOPLE EXPERIENCE VICTORY OVER THEIR ENEMIES

Now we arrive at the climax of the story. When God's enemies thought they had finally gained domination over His people, the tables were completely turned. Instead of defeating the Israelites like they hoped, God's enemies were defeated. Because of His sovereign providence, God's people did not end up as the victims, but the victors. The enemies of the Israelites could not prevail against them.

Now in the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king's command and edict were about to be carried out, on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, the reverse occurred: the Jews gained mastery over those who hated them. The Jews gathered in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on those who sought their harm. And no one could stand against them, for the fear of them had fallen on all peoples. (Esth. 9:1-2)

Throughout the Bible, God often allowed terror to fall on the enemies of His people through changing circumstances or power. It is important to remember that God's hand was behind each circumstance, actively protecting and fighting for His people. The Israelites' victory over King Ahasuerus's provinces was ultimately God's victory. The hand of God is infinitely more powerful than the kingdoms of men. In the Book of Esther, God was truly shown to be the King of kings.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Christ's Humiliation (p. 62, PSG)

Although God the Son was equal with God and worthy of all the glory God receives, He chose to humble Himself by taking on human flesh. He left His glorious state and came in the likeness of sinful flesh (Rom. 8:3), and experienced a humiliating death on a cross (Phil. 2:6-8) by becoming sin for us so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21).

TIMELINE

THE CENTRALITY OF THE WORD

The people gather to hear God's Word.

SHALLOW WORSHIP

The people fail to give God their very best.

**Beginning Spring 2017*

FROM ABRAHAM TO JESUS

The arrival of the Promised One.

CHRIST CONNECTION

The good news of the gospel was foreshadowed throughout this story. Esther was exalted into a high position in order to bring salvation to the Israelites, and in that high position, she was able to be an advocate for her people before the king. Doesn't that sound familiar? Jesus Christ would one day humble Himself to bring about eternal salvation to God's people, sparing them from death. In His resurrection He would be exalted, becoming their advocate before the throne of God (2 Cor. 8:9; 1 John 2:1). Jesus, even greater than Esther, didn't just risk His life, but gave His life to save His people. This is the good news of the gospel.

And with all good news, there is usually bad news. If people do not repent of sin, the story of Haman is a haunting example of what is to come. The punishment of Haman points us forward to the elimination of God's enemies and His final judgment (Rev. 20:7,11-15; 21:8,27). Turn today, before you are caught before the throne of God, and there is no other chance. As you see the weight of your sin, know that the grace of God in Jesus Christ is more than sufficient for your forgiveness. Sure, it is difficult to believe that God can forgive sinners like you and me. But He does. This is the great reversal of judgment and salvation.

YOUR STORY 10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **What can we learn from this account when it comes to trusting God in the midst of difficult circumstances?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How does an eternal perspective help us persevere and trust in God while we are in the middle of tough situations?** *When we focus solely on our circumstances, we essentially blind ourselves to the bigger picture of what may be happening. By taking a step back and considering what God might be doing, we put ourselves in a better situation of seeing the overarching plan of God.*
- **How does Esther's courage and willingness to take risks challenge you in your walk with Christ?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What does this session teach us about humility and pride, especially as shown within the lives of Esther and Haman?** *Answers will vary.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

One of the things we often observe in the Bible, and even in life experience, is that God's work is most clearly seen when circumstances are at their harshest, and when we are most desperate. God calls us to look beyond earthly appearances and strength and to honor and trust Him for final victory. If God has delivered us from sin and death, a terror much greater than Haman, can we not trust Him with the uncertainties and struggles in life? If God has provided an advocate in Jesus Christ, much greater than Esther, can we not trust that He is working all things for good even if we do not see it in the moment?

- **In what ways can we learn to fully rely on God during difficult times?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How does the promise of future victory help you deal with defeat today?** *Knowing the end of the story—that God will make all things new—should affect the way we handle personal defeat in our lives today.*



HEART

In the narrative, Haman selfishly thought the king wanted to honor him. He couldn't imagine anyone the king would want to honor more (6:6b). In redemptive history, God often exalted the humble and brought low those in high positions. In the stories of Jacob (Gen. 25:23), Gideon (Gen. 41:39-44), and David (1 Sam. 16:6-13), we see the theme of God lifting up the humble. Haman the high and wicked was brought low, while Esther, the once orphaned Jewish maiden, was elevated to be the queen of the Persian Empire.

- **Why does God often use the low and humble to do great and mighty things?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How does this theme of “humbling those who exalt themselves” play out in other stories in Scripture? Why do you think this theme is so prominent in Scripture?** *Answers will vary.*



HANDS

God's providential hand is usually hidden from us. However, if you take the time to reflect on your life, you will see His fingerprints all over your journey. The same God who worked in the lives of Esther and Mordecai is the same God who is providentially at work in your life.

- **What are some modern day distractions that can prevent you from noticing God's work in your life?** *Social life, school, sports, and so forth.*
- **Like Esther and Mordecai, how will you take risks in your own life for God's glory and the good of others?** *Answers will vary.*

▶ ADDITIONAL INFO

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPWIN17Dan)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



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09

SESSION NINE

The Prayers of Nehemiah

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we are introduced to Nehemiah who cried out to God in prayer on behalf of his people, asking God to restore them to the promised land. Nehemiah's story reminds us that we follow a God who forgives, redeems, and supplies whatever we need to accomplish His purposes. As Christians, we believe God will bring His kingdom and restore our world, and we pray and act with confidence in His promise.

SCRIPTURE

Nehemiah 1:1-11; 2:1-8

THE POINT

Prayer demonstrates that we are completely dependent upon God.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Have you ever noticed that when life is going smoothly and everything seems safe and secure, it does not seem to occur to us to pray? Sometimes we like to think of ourselves as pretty self-sufficient. We like to believe we have it all under control. Perhaps this contributes to the lack of a solid prayer life.

However, throughout the Bible, prayer is mentioned as a primary and regular discipline in the Christian life. In fact, regular prayer could be noted as a testament of one's spiritual integrity. Prayer is a willful dependence on God for all things (Matt. 6:11-13). It is an attitude of the heart that says, "God, may your will be done above all things" (Matt. 6:10).

From the beginning, Nehemiah's story makes it clear that God's people were in trouble. Their situation was such that God had to intervene to accomplish His will. Because of their circumstances, they were totally dependent on God.

- **Why do you think it is the case that people most often run to God in prayer during the difficult times in life? Why is it important to pray during all seasons of life—when things are difficult and when things are calm?**

Option 2

Ask the students to come up with several different types of controllers. They might say things like: game controllers, TV remote controls, the garage door opener, and so on. Ask the students to think of how many times a day they use these items. Explain that we like to be in control of things, to press a button and have instant results.

- **What are some other things you can control in your daily life? How important is it to you to be able to control those things? Why?**

We're used to the feeling of being in control of certain things, but life often doesn't work that way. We do not have any *Pause* buttons, and we cannot press *Rewind*. God is in control of what happens in our lives and we must depend on Him, whether or not we are fully aware of how much we need Him daily. Through prayer, we can bring our needs before God. We can trust Him to take care of the things we can't control. In fact, God often does far beyond what we could ever imagine when He answers our prayers.

- **When has God taken care of something for you that was well beyond your control?**

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

Prayer demonstrates that we are completely dependent upon God.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God** - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Nehemiah** - Jewish leader who played a central role in the rebuilding of the city wall

PLOT

As we continue along our journey, we are introduced to Nehemiah, one who cried out to God in prayer on behalf of his people, asking God to restore them to the promised land.

TIMELINE

NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER

God works through the prayers of His people.

THE WALL IS REBUILT

God restores the surrounding wall.

THE CENTRALITY OF THE WORD

The people gather to hear God's Word..

NEHEMIAH PRAYED FOR HIS PEOPLE

Nehemiah's story began with Nehemiah's prayer on behalf of his people, the Israelites. Nehemiah, whose name means *God has comforted*, was introduced as the intercessor who represented God's people before Him.

The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel, that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. And they said to me, "The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire." As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. (Neh. 1:1-4)

At this point in their history, the Israelites had been delivered from their second exile in Babylon. However, the remnant that returned to Jerusalem and Judea needed the comfort of God's protection as they inhabited a city with broken down walls. Either the wall had not been rebuilt, or King Artaxerxes had foiled the attempt to rebuild it (Ezra 4:7-23).

Nehemiah cried out to God, well aware of His promise to preserve His people (Ezra 1:1-11). The people needed the protection of their faithful God because, as the passage tells us, they were in great trouble (1:4).

The desperate but trusting posture of prayer exemplified by Nehemiah in response to this situation is instructive. When Nehemiah saw the plight of his people, he wept and mourned, fasting and praying to the sovereign God of heaven.

- **What can you learn from Nehemiah's response to the news from the remnant in Jerusalem?** (p. 66, PSG)

NEHEMIAH PRAYED TO THE GOD WHO FORGIVES AND REDEEMS

The specificity of Nehemiah's prayer indicated that He intimately knew the God of heaven, Yahweh. This was a prayer to the one true God, the God of Israel. Listen in on Nehemiah's prayer.

And I said, "O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.' They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man." Now I was cupbearer to the king. (Neh. 1:5-11)

- Take a look at the prayer of Nehemiah. What attributes of God did he appeal to? What characteristics did he use to describe the people? (p. 66, PSG)

Notice that when Nehemiah called out to the God of Israel, he also confessed Israel's sin and recalled their commitment to obedience from the time of Moses. Nehemiah confessed that he and the entire people of God had become corrupt and had failed to keep the commands given to Moses (1:6-7). Moreover, he recognized that their sin had resulted in their current situation (1:8). Their disobedience had led to their exile in Babylon.

However, there was hope. Nehemiah recalled that God would reestablish His people if they returned to Him. Although their disobedience brought exile, their obedience would bring blessing (Lev. 26:3-13; Deut. 28:1-14). Like Moses, Nehemiah appealed to God's covenant that if Israel repented He would restore them to the land.

This story tells of the second exodus of God's people. In one sense, Israel returned to their land by the decree of Cyrus (Ezra 5:13). However, we know that God providentially worked in Cyrus as an instrument to bring about His

plans just as he did with Pharaoh in Egypt. Just like in the first exodus, it was ultimately by the mighty hand of God that Israel was redeemed. The similarities allowed Nehemiah to pray with confidence, looking back at the first exodus event in Egypt, and looking forward through the Babylonian exodus to find comfort in the covenant-keeping God who shows His steadfast love to His people.

NEHEMIAH PRAYED WHILE HE TOOK ACTION

Chapter 2 granted us access to the king's table. As Nehemiah the cupbearer handed the king his wine, the king noticed his disposition (1:11; 2:1). This was the first time Nehemiah had been sad in the king's presence, so the king discerned that something was wrong.

In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. And the king said to me, "Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart." Then I was very much afraid. I said to the king, "Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?" Then the king said to me, "What are you requesting?" So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it." And the king said to me (the queen sitting beside him), "How long will you be gone, and when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time. And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah, and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy." And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me. (Neh. 2:1-8)

Nehemiah requested that the king send him home, to the city where his ancestors were buried, so that he could rebuild it. He also asked the king for authoritative letters to show to the governor who had previously convinced Artaxerxes to stop the rebuilding of that very city (Ezra 4:7-9). Even more, Nehemiah requested lumber from the king's forests to fund the project.

These were massive requests, and astonishingly, the king granted Nehemiah his requests! God had been preparing for the rebuilding of His land all along. Unlike the first exodus, when God's people left Babylon, they did not have to plunder for precious metals and stones. In that case, the king granted them access to all that they needed to accomplish this purpose.

TIMELINE

SHALLOW WORSHIP

The people fail to give God their very best.

**Beginning Spring 2017*

FROM ABRAHAM TO JESUS

The arrival of the Promised One.

MARY PRAISES GOD

God works in the heart and life of Mary.

As he did for Joseph, Daniel, and Esther, once again, God brought favor with kings. Proverbs 21:1 reminds us that “The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.” And it is so here in Nehemiah 2, another example of the “God of heaven” providentially directing events to bring about His sovereign purposes.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Prayer and Providence (p. 67, PSG)

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

CHRIST CONNECTION

Nehemiah's intercession for the people foreshadowed Jesus' intercession for us before God the Father (Heb. 7:25). That Nehemiah heard of the distress of God's people, wept, and prayed for them (Neh. 1:3-4) gives us a picture of Jesus Christ, who wept and prayed over Jerusalem in the shadow of the cross (Luke 19:41). Jesus, a greater intercessor than Nehemiah, wept over His people *and* gave His life for them. Jesus not only felt their burden, but also carried their burden to Golgotha. There on the cross He became their protection from the one enemy that no one else could defeat: sin and death (Eph. 2:1-10). The good news is that the same God who answered Nehemiah, is the same God who hears and bears our burdens today (Ps. 68:19). Similarly, we can rest assured that Jesus hears our cry for salvation and answers it.

YOUR STORY 10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **When was the last time you prayed because you felt heavily burdened for a specific person or situation?** *Answers will vary.*
- **When you are struck with fear, anxiety, or insecurity, what is your first response? What or whom do you typically reach for? How is Nehemiah's example instructive for us?** *Answers will vary.*
- **When Nehemiah talked to the king, he also prayed internally that God would work in the situation. What does this teach us about prayer and how it doesn't always need to be audible or noticeable?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How does the picture of Christ, carrying our burden of sin to the cross, motivate us to cry out to Him with the burdens we encounter in this life?** *Answers will vary.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

Have you ever wondered why Jesus told the disciples to pray for their needs (Matt. 6:11-13), after He told them that God knew all their needs before they even asked (Matt. 6:7-8)? Sounds strange unless you understand that in prayer, God enlists us as participants in the work He is doing. Prayer is the means to accomplish God's will. Through prayer we become instruments to bring about God's will and appointed goals.

- **How does it encourage you to know that God knows your needs even before you ask?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How does it encourage you to know that God works through your prayers to answer them?** *Answers will vary.*



HEART

We learn from this account that the best way to respond to God's steadfast love is by keeping His commandments (Deut. 7:9; Neh. 1:5). Like Israel, we are called to obey in loving and worshipful response to God's love, shown through our salvation in Christ. Of course, it is extremely important to know that true obedience is a response to God's love, not a requirement for God's love. We love Him because He loved us first (1 John 4:19).

- **Why is it important to emphasize that obedience is the response to God's love and not a requirement for it?** *If it was a requirement, then salvation would be works-based, not grace-based.*
- **What does it say about us if we know God's loving forgiveness but don't seek to follow Him in obedience?** *It communicates that we haven't truly internalized that truth; that the "knowing" has remained a head issue without affecting our entire being.*



HANDS

Nehemiah's prayer life is an example to us in our own lives. Nehemiah realized that even though God was sovereign and in control, orchestrating events for His glory and the good of His people, he was still called to pray and ask God to move in the situation. As Trevin Wax says, "Prayer is motivated by present need (daily bread) in light of future hope (kingdom come)." In other words, our assurance in Christ and His future return is what fuels our confidence into today's prayers.

- **How can the past actions and future promises of God provide us with confidence in prayer for our current circumstances?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How consistent is your prayer life? What have you learned from Nehemiah's account that might encourage you to be more disciplined in this area?** *Answers will vary.*

▶ ADDITIONAL INFO

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPWIN17Dan)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at

GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for ***free online training*** on how to lead a group visit

MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject



10

SESSION TEN

The Rebuilding of the Wall

SESSION SUMMARY

Nehemiah tells a story of restoration and reorganization: God restored His people to the promised land and reorganized them as His covenant people. As Nehemiah's story continued, God's people faced conflict from the outside and inside. However, because they persevered in repentance and faith, they accomplished God's will despite their circumstances. The Book of Nehemiah demonstrates that God calls us to do the right thing, in the right way, and then give Him the glory for success. We also learn that God is glorified not only in our fulfillment of a task, but also in the way we fulfill that task.

SCRIPTURE

Nehemiah 4:7-14; 5:1-13; 6:15-16

THE POINT

God calls us to do the right thing in the right way.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

In the biblical storyline, we often see that God's kingdom agenda contradicts the kingdoms of this world.

It's true that there are certain instances when the ways of this world align with God's plan. But most of the time, God's agenda stands in stark contrast to the patterns and demands of the culture we find ourselves in. Remember the words of Jesus: His kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36).

How should Christians respond when they find themselves in situations that call for acts of faith that seem impossible in light of their circumstances? This section of Nehemiah reminds us of the priority of prayer and the responsibility of wise action.

- **How do you determine what course of action is “wisest” when you are faced with a difficult choice?**

Option 2

Disobedience does not always mean choosing to do something that is obviously wrong. Sometimes, disobedience is more about compromise. We obey in some areas, and compromise in others, or we choose which laws or parts of laws we want to obey—neither option is true obedience.

- **When have you compromised what you believed or what you knew you were supposed to do? Describe that situation.**
- **What would wholehearted obedience have looked like in that situation?**

The Israelites obeyed God by rebuilding the wall, but their fields and families suffered from neglect. They were obeying God in one respect, but they were going about it in the wrong way, resulting in disobedience and their need to repent. Likewise, we must consider in our own lives the importance of not only doing the right thing, but doing the right thing in the way God desires.

- **When it comes to obeying God, why do you think the way we do something is just as important as doing the thing we are commanded to do?**

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God calls us to do the right thing in the right way.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God** - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Nehemiah** - Jewish leader who played a central role in the rebuilding of the city wall

PLOT

Nehemiah tells a story of restoration and reorganization: God restored the Israelites to the promised land and reorganized them as His covenant people. As Nehemiah's story continued, God's people faced conflict from the outside and inside. However, because they persevered in repentance and faith, they accomplished God's will despite their circumstances.

TIMELINE

THE WALL IS REBUILT

God restores the surrounding wall.

THE CENTRALITY OF THE WORD

The people gather to hear God's Word.

SHALLOW WORSHIP

The people fail to give God their very best.

NEHEMIAH CALLED THE PEOPLE TO ACT WISELY

The initial request to rebuild the city was endorsed by the king, and carried out under his protection and support. But the question was, would they achieve this ambitious plan? In this section of Scripture, the likelihood of achieving their goal became grim, at least by human standards.

But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry. And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it. And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night. In Judah it was said, “The strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. There is too much rubble. By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall.” And our enemies said, “They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work.” At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, “You must return to us.” So in the lowest parts of the space behind the wall, in open places, I stationed the people by their clans, with their swords, their spears, and their bows. And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, “Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.” (Neh. 4:7-14)

God's people were confronted with additional difficulties. First, God's people were despised by Sanballat and his associates—the men who were set on stopping God's people from building the wall.

Second, the foundations of the wall were in ruins. God's enemies mocked the Israelites, pointing out that the wall's foundations were rubbish, and a mere fox could knock down their feeble work. By all human standards, the possibility of achieving their goal did not look good.

The primary reason Sanballat and his associates were so adamant about stopping this work was because they were seeking their own good at the expense of God's people. Once the walls were built and God's people could begin living under His law with one another, it would be very hard for the enemies of God to exploit the Israelites.

The good news is that while the enemies of God's people plotted together to stop their task (4:8), God's people stood confident in the face of conflict. The Israelites armed themselves with prayer and persevered in obedience. Simply put, in the face of opposition, God's people guarded one another and continued building the wall.

Nehemiah was sure of God's protection and provision in this task. He called the people to not be afraid but to remember their God, how great and awesome He was, and to fight for sake of their families and their homes. Nehemiah's trust was founded on his knowledge of God, who would fight for them, just as He had done in generations past (4:14,20).

- **What are the “wise” aspects you see in Nehemiah’s response to the opposition he faced? What would have been an unwise response?**
(p. 72, PSG)

THE PEOPLE OVERCAME OBSTACLES AND GAVE GOD GLORY FOR THE SUCCESS

Even after the Israelites resumed building and were encouraged by Nehemiah, they still faced opposition. The enemies of God were not only angry that Nehemiah had come, but they were also angry about the wall being rebuilt. The rebuilding of the wall was part of the plan to create a community environment for the protection of God's people, and an environment where God's laws could be enforced and His justice upheld.

Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. For there were those who said, “With our sons and our daughters, we are many. So let us get grain, that we may eat and keep alive.” There were also those who said, “We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine.” And there were those who said, “We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards. Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers, our children are as their children. Yet we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but it is not in our power to help it, for other men have our fields and our vineyards.” I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these words. I took counsel with myself, and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, “You are exacting interest, each from his brother.” And I held a great assembly against them and said to them, “We, as far as we are able, have bought back our Jewish brothers who have been sold to the nations, but you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us!” They were silent and could not find a word to say. So I said, “The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies? Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest. Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them.” Then they said, “We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say.” And I called the priests and made them swear to do as they had

promised. I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, “So may God shake out every man from his house and from his labor who does not keep this promise. So may he be shaken out and emptied.” And all the assembly said “Amen” and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised. (Neh. 5:1-13)

While God’s people focused on the work of the wall, they had apparently neglected their fields. In light of this neglect, they hired others to work their fields in exchange for grain. Moreover, while there was famine because of the neglect, the king did not suspend the taxes they owed. Because of this situation, God’s people were selling their children into debt-slavery. During this time, God’s people also neglected the poor and compromised their ability to provide for themselves.

Nehemiah became angry, and rightly so. Not only had they placed their children and the poor in a terrible position, they were also charging interest against one another (5:6-8). Jews charging other Jews interest was strictly forbidden in the Law of Moses. Still, despite the threats from both the inside and out, God worked in His people to accomplish His task in miraculous time.

So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God. (Neh. 6:15-16)

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Social Concern (p. 74, PSG)

All Christians are under obligation to seek to make the will of Christ supreme in our own lives and in human society. Means and methods used for the improvement of society and the establishment of righteousness among men can be truly and permanently helpful only when they are rooted in the regeneration of the individual by the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. In the spirit of Christ, Christians should oppose racism, every form of greed, selfishness, and vice, and all forms of sexual immorality, including adultery, homosexuality, and pornography. 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. Every Christian should seek to bring industry, government, and society as a whole under the sway of the principles of righteousness, truth, and brotherly love. In order to promote these ends Christians should be ready to work with all men of good will in any good cause, always being careful to act in the spirit of love without compromising their loyalty to Christ and His truth. (Micah 6:8; Eph. 6:5-9; 1 Thess. 3:12).

TIMELINE

**Beginning Spring 2017*

FROM ABRAHAM TO JESUS

The arrival of the Promised One.

MARY PRAISES GOD

God works in the heart and life of Mary.

GOD WITH US

The good news of Jesus' Incarnation

This story is a clear reminder that God's people should not underestimate what God can accomplish through them if they trust in Him and persevere in obedience.

CHRIST CONNECTION

Nehemiah's exhortation to not fear, and to trust and obey, stands as a comforting testimony to Christians today. Nehemiah presented a situation where the nations gathered against God's people, and thus against their God. This reminds us of Psalm 4:1-4, in which God's enemies vainly plotted against the Almighty.

We must also not forget that God's Son faced certain opposition, just like the Israelites faced opposition from Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites. In fact, the Scriptures remind us that Jesus was also despised and rejected by men (Isa. 53:3; 1 Pet. 2:23). Like Nehemiah and the Israelites, Jesus remained steadfast and obedient, even through death (Phil. 2:8). Furthermore, Jesus was victorious (1 Cor. 15:55-57). As we reflect on the gospel, we should be reminded that God fought for us through Christ. We are called to battle on even as we are despised and rejected, remembering our great and awe-inspiring God.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **Fear is a strong force that often keeps us from fulfilling God's will for our lives. What are some specific ways that we, the people of God, can fight fear with faith?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Why is it important that we keep a close watch on our own lives as we seek to be obedient to the will and commands of God?** *Answers will vary.*
- **When we are confronted with our own shortfalls and sins, there are two responses: to repent and turn, or to react with resistance. How does the gospel empower us toward the first response?** *The gospel empowers us to humble ourselves, admit our wrongs, and seek forgiveness at the throne of grace, knowing it is only through humble submission to Jesus we can be forgiven.*
- **When have you seen God do something so amazing that you realized "only God could have done this?"** *Answers will vary.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

We, like the Israelites in this passage, can never fully live up to God's law. Even though the Israelites were fully focused on accomplishing God's will in building the wall, they compromised in other areas. As they compromised in other areas, the entire work of building the wall was compromised. The good news is, when Nehemiah confronted their sin, they repented and sought to make right their wrongs (5:12-13). Just as the Israelites repented after Nehemiah's convicting call, we should also repent when confronted with compromise in our own lives.

- **What are some areas of compromise in your own life where repentance is needed?**
Answers will vary.
- **What are some ways to identify any blind spots of sin that you may not be aware of?**
Asking a godly and trusted friend if they see anything in your life you are not able to see, self-reflection on your life, taking stock of any heart idols that may be present, and so forth.



HEART

Throughout this story Nehemiah reminded the people that God was with them. Nehemiah also declared that God would not only give them the ability to accomplish this task, but that He would also make them prosper. Moreover, Nehemiah knew that God would not only frustrate their enemies, He would also fight for His people. All of these truths climax in the triumphant declaration, even by their enemies, that God had accomplished this work.

- **In light of His promises to the Israelites despite their compromises, what does this story teach you about God's character?** *In essence, it shows us once again that God is good and faithful to keep His promises.*
- **Why should this strengthen your own belief in God's promises to you found in Scripture?**
Answers will vary.



HANDS

This story challenges believers to attempt great things *for* God while at the same time expecting great things *from* God. Keeping these two notions together is important in light of the fact that great things done for the sake of the Kingdom won't come about while Christians are sitting comfortably on the sidelines, unwilling to participate. No, God calls us to act, serve, and take risks, all while acknowledging our complete and utter dependence upon Him to accomplish His purposes.

- **How does this story challenge the perception that Christianity is merely a set of beliefs to be held and not a life to be lived?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Why is it important to give God glory for the success we experience?** *Answers will vary.*

▶ ADDITIONAL INFO

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPWIN17Dan)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at

GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for ***free online training*** on how to lead a group visit

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11

SESSION ELEVEN

God's People Gather

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we see how God's people were shaped by God's Word. As Ezra proclaimed God's Word, the people honored the voice of God, responded with repentance, and were renewed. Likewise, biblical fellowship today must be centered on God's Word. As we gather together to listen to God speak to us through the Scriptures, we are challenged to repentance, strengthened in our fellowship, and empowered for our mission.

SCRIPTURE

Nehemiah 8:1-12

THE POINT

Biblical community must be centered on God's Word.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Every year on December 31, masses of people cram together into Times Square, in the heart of Manhattan. As midnight approaches, all eyes turn upward and millions around the world fix their gaze upon the ball at the top of a pole. A countdown begins, the ball drops, and as soon as the clock strikes midnight, everyone collectively ushers in the new year! People describe the atmosphere as electric.

There is something special about being gathered together with other people for one purpose. Whether it is a college or professional sporting event, an outdoor music festival, or a holiday celebration, people love to gather together for one focus. The same is true whenever believers gather to hear God's Word.

Nehemiah 8:1-2 presents a powerful example of gathering to hear God's Word. Here we see the nation of Israel gathered together, not to see a ball drop or to cheer on their favorite team, but to hear the Word of God being read.

- **What are some fun activities you gather together with others to celebrate?**
- **How can you change your attitude to view studying God's Word the same way?**

Option 2

Gather students in groups of three to four, and ask them to think of different events or holidays they celebrate by getting together with others. List these events and holidays on a white board or poster board at the front of the room.

- **What is the focus of each one of these events and holidays? Why is it important to know the focus and remember it as we celebrate?**

In Jerusalem, a prophet named Ezra read the law of God aloud to the people as commanded in the Law of Moses. All of the Israelites gathered just to hear God's Word read aloud. In the same way, it is also important for us to gather together to study God's Word with other believers.

- **Why do you think it is important for us to study God's Word with other believers? How will this help you grow in your relationship with God?**

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

Biblical community must be centered on God's Word.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God** - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Ezra** - a prophet who returned to Jerusalem in order to help reestablish the Jewish community and remind them they were still God's chosen people

PLOT

God was faithful to His people—to sustain them during their years in exile, to bring them back to rebuild the temple, and to allow them to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem under Nehemiah's leadership. With the walls and the temple rebuilt, God's people were ready to experience a revival—they heard God's Word and sought to obey it.

TIMELINE

THE CENTRALITY OF THE WORD

The people gather to hear God's Word.

SHALLOW WORSHIP

The people fail to give God their very best.

**Beginning Spring 2017*

FROM ABRAHAM TO JESUS

The arrival of the Promised One.

GOD'S PEOPLE ARE CENTERED ON THE WORD

Throughout Israel's history, idolatry was at the root of their rebellion against God. Because of their sin, God's people spent over 70 years in exile. Once they moved back to Jerusalem, they were able to gather publicly and worship the Lord by listening to His Word. The event was timely, because the Law required the nation to gather to hear the Word of God read every seven years (Deut. 31:9-13).

And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel. So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. (Neh. 8:1-2)

As Christians, we do not have to wait for the availability of God's Word. We're blessed to hear God's Word proclaimed, not every seven years, but every seven days. That doesn't even include our ability to read God's Word on our own throughout the week. The beauty of gathering together to hear a pastor teach God's Word (2 Tim. 2:15; 4:2) is that we are then equipped for every good work God has called us to do for His glory (Eph. 2:10; 4:11-16).

- **How can you tell if a church is centered on the proclamation of God's Word or centered on something else? Why is gathering to hear God's Word so important for believers?** (p. 78, PSG)

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Inspiration of Scripture (p. 79, PSG)

The inspiration of Scripture refers to God's direction of the human authors of the Bible so that they composed and recorded His message to humankind in their original writings (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:19-21). Occasionally, this inspiration was achieved through dictation, where God directly spoke to the original authors. Most of the time, however, this inspiration was achieved through the supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit through the personalities of the authors so that their writings can be considered the very words of God.

GOD'S PEOPLE REVERE THE WORD TOGETHER

We live in a culture where it's sometimes hard to hold a person's attention. It seems our attention spans are getting shorter and shorter. We quickly turn to electronic devices whenever we face a moment of boredom. Consider the contrast with the people of Israel and how they listened to God's Word on this day:

And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. (Neh. 8:3-6)

The Israelites' response was probably an amazing sight. First, all the people stood when Ezra opened up the Scriptures. Ezra opened in prayer and declared praise to God, causing the people to raise their hands and proclaim, "Amen, Amen."

Second, the people expected God to bless them through the reading of His Word. This ushered in a sense of humility evidenced by the people bowing and placing their faces on the ground while worshiping the Lord. It's a beautiful thing to take part in when the people of God gather as one, declaring praise to Him and worshiping Him.

Third, note that they listened to God's Word together. True biblical revival is experienced in community. In addition to confessing our sins to God, perhaps the next step we must take is confess our sins to one another, in order to extend forgiveness to others in the same fashion we've been forgiven by God. Then and only then will we experience the joy of revival in community!

GOD'S PEOPLE RESPOND IN REPENTANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

True revival causes God's people to gather to hear His Word, render Him genuine praise, and then desire to obey His commands. Throughout Scripture, we see God calling His people to repent and walk in righteousness together. In Nehemiah 8:7-12 we glimpse what a national revival looks like, and make no mistake, the call to national repentance and accountability are both present.

Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. Then he said to them, "Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved." And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them. (Neh. 8:7-12)

Here we see Ezra reading the Scriptures. Some people may not have understood the language the Scriptures were written in because they had grown up in a foreign land, where Hebrew was not spoken, read, or written. In response, the Levites walked among the people and took time to explain the Scriptures to them in a language they were able to understand. Once the people understood God's Word they began to weep—they were broken by their heritage of disobedience.

God provided His people with an opportunity to demonstrate their repentance. They were to celebrate the Feast of the Trumpets. This seems to be God's pattern for His people: God speaks, His people listen with open ears and hearts, He corrects them, the people are broken by their sin, and God comforts them with His Word and shows them how to live righteously.

As believers today, we take heart when we read 2 Timothy 3:16: "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." Since God is the Author of Scripture, and it is not in His character to lie (Num. 23:19; Heb. 6:18), we know His Word is absolutely true. When God's Word is taught faithfully, it confronts our errors and shows us the way to live.

TIMELINE

MARY PRAISES GOD

God works in the heart and life of Mary.

GOD WITH US

The good news of Jesus' Incarnation.

JESUS' EARLY YEARS

Jesus grows in favor with God and men.

CHRIST CONNECTION

The comfort we have today is in the gospel. Jesus provides salvation and sanctification for all who embrace Him as Savior. The gospel promises that those who have trusted Christ as Savior are forgiven of their sins (Eph. 1:7) because Jesus, who never sinned, became sin on our behalf so we could be declared righteous by God (2 Cor. 5:21).

But this isn't the end of the story. Now, we are blessed with the ability to walk in righteousness because God the Holy Spirit has taken up residence in believers (Rom. 8:9-13). He provides us with the ability to understand God's Word as it is read and preached. The Spirit convicts us of our sin and strengthens us to confess our sins and put to death the desires of our flesh (Rom. 8:13).

YOUR STORY 10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **What things may be filling up your heart and life and preventing you from having a hunger and thirst for God's Word?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What are some ways we can hold each other accountable as we seek to obey God's Word?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What benefits follow from reading and studying God's Word?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How has this session encouraged or challenged you when it comes to your own personal study of God's Word?** *Answers will vary.*

HIS STORY

*God's Story of
Redemption,
through His Son,
Jesus Christ.*

YOUR STORY

*Where your story
meets His.*

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

It is interesting to note that the people of Israel stood there and listened to the reading of Scripture for over six hours. No cell phones, no social media, and no electronic devices to fiddle with when they got bored. They were not able to have a public reading of Scripture for decades, but through Ezra's reading, God's voice spoke again. Why were they so hungry to hear God's Word? Because they knew they were hearing the actual words of God.

- **Why do we so often fail to crave God's Word as we should?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What are some ways we can increase our desire to read and listen to God's Word?** *One way might be to develop the habit to listen to good sermons, whether in the car or through your smartphone. Exposure to solid biblical teaching will directly affect one's desire for the Word.*



HEART

We experience revival when we focus on hearing from God through His Word as it is read and explained to us. Revival happens in community, never in isolation. It also happens when God's people repent and hold each other accountable. When we discipline ourselves to gather together to hear God's Word, we can expect the Word to impact the way we think and view the world around us. We will develop a deeper burden to know God more intimately. We will grow in our desire to share the gospel with those who don't know God and are not pursuing Him.

- **Why do you think God chose His Word to be the main source for bringing revival?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What area(s) mentioned above do you need to re-prioritize in the coming weeks—God's Word, experiencing community with other believers, repentance, and accountability?** *Answers will vary.*



HANDS

The leaders of the nation of Israel influenced the people by leading them in the reading of Scripture, offering explanation to those who did not understand the language (Neh. 8:4-6). The people observed the nation's leaders as God's Word was being read. Ezra praised God, and the people followed his example. The leaders in this scene were shaping culture by humbly listening to God's Word with people they were leading.

- **When has someone helped you understand something in Scripture that was difficult to understand?** *Answers will vary.*
- **When have you helped someone else understand something in Scripture?** *Answers will vary.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack item #10, which contains an artistic poster that symbolizes the centrality of God's Word in the life of believers.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPWIN17Dan)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



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12

SESSION TWELVE

The Warning Against Shallow Worship

SESSION SUMMARY

Malachi, the final book in the Old Testament, speaks extensively about God's people and how they should worship Him—or perhaps more specifically, how they shouldn't worship Him. While the people Malachi wrote to may have been free from pagan idolatry or heretical doctrine, their worship had grown stale and lifeless. The Word delivered to Malachi was a wake-up call to a people who engaged in half-hearted worship, and Malachi's message resonates with us still today.

SCRIPTURE

Malachi 1:6-14; 3:7-12; 4:1-6

THE POINT

Worship involves giving God our very best.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

In his book, *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell argued that “overnight success” is rare. It is more frequently spelled with the letters *W-O-R-K*. His book offers examples of successful people: J. Robert Oppenheimer, the Beatles, Bill Gates, and so on. He shows how these people were not instantly successful; they became successful by dedicating at least 10,000 hours to their particular crafts—programming, practicing, and putting in hours when nobody was looking.¹

If you were asked what kinds of adjectives could describe a professional athlete, you might respond with words like *excellent*, *devoted*, *committed*, or *passionate*. The same adjectives would apply to a prominent entrepreneur, a successful businessman, or a talented actor.

- **Who is someone whose success you admire? What athlete, musician, or writer has abilities you appreciate? How would you describe them?**

Now, let’s change the question. Instead of describing an athlete or businessman, what if we asked which adjectives would describe your devotion to and worship of the Lord? Would you give the same adjectives in order to describe your worship?

Given the pervasiveness of human sin and the hardness of the human heart, it is not surprising that Israel lacked devotion, passion, and commitment in the time of the prophet Malachi. God had given His people the best: He had redeemed them from the Egyptians, led them through the desert, shown them the land, promised the basic necessities for life (i.e., milk and honey), marched them into the promised land, and conquered their enemies.

But what was their response to His steadfast love for them? While one would think it would be extravagant praise and loving obedience, they instead offered him what can only be described as worthless worship. And, on this sad note, the Old Testament drew to a close.

Option 2

The word *worship* means to express one’s admiration, awe, reverence, or love for someone or something. In Christian circles we know worship as the way we express our love back to God.

- **What comes to mind when you hear the word *worship*?**

Biblical worship isn’t a performance or empty praise, but showing our wholehearted devotion to God. We can worship in many ways—through music, prayer, reading the Bible—knowing that no matter the expression, worship stems from a heart that is completely satisfied in God.

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

Worship involves giving God our very best.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God** - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Malachi** - prophet of God; his book is the last book of the Old Testament

PLOT

As our journey through the Old Testament comes to an end, we take a look at the Book of Malachi. This final book in the Old Testament speaks extensively about God's people and how they should worship Him—or perhaps more specifically, how they shouldn't worship Him. While the people Malachi wrote to may have been free from pagan idolatry, their worship had grown stale and lifeless.

TIMELINE

SHALLOW WORSHIP

The people fail to give God their very best.

**Beginning Spring 2017*

FROM ABRAHAM TO JESUS

The arrival of the Promised One.

MARY PRAISES GOD

God works in the heart and life of Mary.

THE PEOPLE COMMITTED SHALLOW WORSHIP

When we think of biblical commandments, we tend not to think of the 613 commandments given in the Old Testament, but of the “Big Ten,” which we see on posters and learn about in church. One of these commandments explicitly tells us to honor our father and mother. Is it any wonder, then, that God expects obedience and honor as our spiritual Father? Look at how God addressed His people through His prophet Malachi:

“A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. But you say, ‘How have we despised your name?’ By offering polluted food upon my altar. But you say, ‘How have we polluted you?’ By saying that the LORD's table may be despised. When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor; will he accept you or show you favor? says the LORD of hosts. And now entreat the favor of God, that he may be gracious to us. With such a gift from your hand, will he show favor to any of you? says the LORD of hosts. (Mal. 1:6-9)

Notice that God gave two indictments against His people at the beginning: they showed Him no honor, and they showed Him no fear. Not only did they *not* honor and fear Him, but they *despised* His name.

Despising means *having an attitude of ongoing disrespect for someone or something*; it refers to the act of conveying insignificance or worthlessness upon an object, idea, or individual. The text shows us that the people did this to God by offering crippled, lame, or blinded animals to the Lord rather than the perfect, blameless sacrifice He requested. He even asked them, “Do you think that if you gave even the governor what you’re giving me that he’d be okay with it?”

- In what ways do people “despise” God’s name today? (p. 84, PSG)
- How can you guard against this in your own life? (p. 84, PSG)

Oh that there were one among you who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, says the LORD of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hand. For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts. But you profane it when you say that the Lord's table is polluted, and its fruit, that is, its food

may be despised. But you say, 'What a weariness this is,' and you snort at it, says the LORD of hosts. You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering! Shall I accept that from your hand? says the LORD. Cursed be the cheat who has a male in his flock, and vows it, and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished. For I am a great King, says the LORD of hosts, and my name will be feared among the nations. (Mal. 1:10-14)

We could try to put this into perspective for a 21st century audience by saying, "Shut the doors to every church in the world. No more church. No more meetings. It's over." But that analogy breaks down significantly because the Israelites were dependent upon the temple for everything. They were dependent upon the temple for their sacrifices. They were dependent upon the temple for the forgiveness of their sins, for their festivals, for their feast days, and for their offerings. The temple was even the center of national banking and Jewish political power. Without the temple, the nation would cease to function.

Because of how flippantly the priests (and, consequently, the rest of Israel) treated Him, God's anger against them was kindled. This was not an image of an unjust, angry God. He asked for the honor that is rightly due Him. It was the people's lack of respect that ignited God's anger against them because it was a minimization of His worth. The greatness of God should drive us to our knees and cause us to give Him the absolute best of everything that we have to show our adoration.

THEIR SHALLOW WORSHIP MINIMIZED GOD'S WORTH

On a rainy Sunday afternoon, a little brother and sister were playing "Noah's Ark." Their bathtub functioned as the floodwaters and an old shoebox was a makeshift ark. After the floodwaters had receded, the children decided to present an offering to God. The boy, who was playing the part of Noah, said to his sister (Mrs. Noah), "Here, let's offer up one of your toy animals as a sacrifice." She protested, "No, let's use one of your animals instead!" Her brother replied, "Not a chance!" After a time of disagreement, the girl ran into their attic. Moments later she emerged with an old toy lamb. It was dingy and dirty. Its head was smashed in, and its tail was severed from its body. "Here," she said, "let's use this as our misguided sacrifice. We will never play with it again anyway." Sadly, this story resembles many of us—the motivation of our hearts in serving or sacrificing to God is often. We offer God what's left and not what's best.

In the first half of the Book of Malachi, God questioned the quality of the sacrifices of the people. Then, He questioned the quantity of their sacrifices.

From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, 'How shall we return?' Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, 'How have we robbed you?' In your tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And

thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the LORD of hosts. Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts. (Mal. 3:7-12)

After hearing from God, the Israelites questioned their departure from God by denying that they ever left in the first place. After all, they still sacrificed to Him, right?

Before we harshly judge the Israelites, we must remember how easy it is to wander. “Far from God?” a churchgoer might say, “I am not far from God! I go to church every week! How can you say that I am far from God?” Many are blinded to the fact that they are blinded.

Essentially, God told the Israelites that despite their believing otherwise, they were far from Him. God had challenged the Israelites previously for their poor sacrifices, their lack of worship, their idolatry, and their faithlessness. *The root of the problem is the heart.* They had misappropriated their funds. In other words, they failed to deal responsibly with what God had given them. Giving is an indication of the state of our hearts, and measures how much we value God.

SHALLOW WORSHIP DESERVES JUDGMENT

The text speaks of a future light in the midst of Israel’s darkness. Israel expected unending blessings because of their position as God’s chosen people. However, God first informed them that He would come to set all wrongs right—beginning the process with their lukewarm worship.

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

TIMELINE

GOD WITH US

The good news of Jesus' Incarnation.

JESUS' EARLY YEARS

Jesus grows in favor with God and men.

JESUS' BAPTISM

The meaning of baptism in the life of the believer.

Israel looked forward to the day when the Lord would repay wrongdoing, but they did not realize that it was a day of judgment. When the Lord returns again, the same conditions apply: He will exact justice, and it is up to us to be prepared for it. The question we must ask ourselves is, “Am I ready for this second coming?”

The final two verses of Malachi offer the ultimate cliffhanger to the Old Testament. He ends with a promise of someone to come and a warning about things already done. “Look,” Malachi wrote, “I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before Day of the Lord comes. 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.”

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Worship (p. 86, PSG)

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

CHRIST CONNECTION

In the New Testament, a priest named Zechariah was told that he and his wife would have a son in their old age, and he was struck mute for disbelieving the angel's message. Zechariah's son was John the Baptist. When he was finally born, Zechariah's tongue was loosed, he was filled with the Holy Spirit, immediately praised God, and prophesied that John would prepare the way for Jesus. The phrase “sunrise ... from on high” (Luke 1:78) was most likely a direct reference to Malachi 4:2. The “sun of righteousness” was the Messiah to come; the “sun” is the Son—Jesus Christ. The next book of the Bible begins the story of the Son of God's arrival on earth.

YOUR STORY 10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **Sometimes people assume they are in a right relationship with God, but they are not. What are some ways we can guard against having such a false notion?**
One way would be to take a step back and examine whether there is any fruit in one's own life that would serve as a sign of saving grace—good works that naturally flow from an existing relationship with Jesus. Other signs to look at would be whether one has experienced a change of heart towards God, being fully satisfied with Jesus and all that He has done for him or her.
- **What are some areas of life where students struggle to give God their best?**
Answers will vary.
- **How does this passage relate to Jesus' words about our hearts being where our treasure is?** *Answers will vary.*
- **After having gone through the Old Testament up to this point, what have been some highlights for you? What individuals and/or accounts have challenged you most in your walk with Christ?** *Answers will vary.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

We learned from Malachi 3:6-12 about our actions and God's reactions. First, the Book of Malachi teaches that if we obey the mandates of God in humble and faithful service, we can expect God to act. This does not mean He rewards us immediately or even financially; however, when we trust God with what we have, we experience His blessing.

- **How should Christians understand the promise that God will bless Israel if they obey?** *There are obvious blessings to obeying God, even if those blessings aren't immediately seen. In fact, it could be the case that God's blessings through some acts of obedience won't be seen until this life ends.*
- **What are some ways this idea could be misunderstood and misapplied?** *Some people jump to the conclusion that obedience automatically leads to health, wealth, and prosperity. However, this type of thinking is unbiblical.*



HEART

God calls us to give the very best of everything we have out of love for Him. In fact, Scripture teaches that followers of Christ should be in the habit of offering up these five things in particular: Our bodies (Rom. 12:1-2), our finances (Phil. 4:14-18), our praise (Heb. 13:15), our works (Heb. 13:16), and our witness (Rom. 15:16). In light of God's greatness and everything He freely offers to us through His Son, we should be willing to joyfully submit all things to Him in response.

- **In what ways does our worship of God through these five offerings display God's greatness?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What do we communicate about our view of God and His grace toward us when we fail to give Him our very best?** *Answers will vary.*



HANDS

We learn from these texts that God has blessed us to be a blessing to others. We are to give the Lord our time, talents, and treasures for both His glory and the good of others. As Jim Elliot said, "A man is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

- **What are some ways you are intentionally seeking to be a blessing to others with your time, talents, and treasures?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How might your blessing others in this way point them to Christ?** *Answers will vary.*

▶ ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack item #11, which contains a quote poster related to the topic of worship.

SOURCES

1. Malcom Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2011).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPWIN17Dan)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at

GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for **free online training** on how to lead a group visit

MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject

STUDY PLAN

YEAR 1

Fall 2015

God the Creator (Genesis 1-11)
God the Covenant-Maker
(Genesis 12-50)

Winter 2016

God the Redeemer
(Exodus)
God the Lawgiver
(Exodus, Leviticus,
Deuteronomy)

Spring 2016

God the Savior
(Numbers, Joshua)
God the Judge (Judges,
Ruth, 1 Samuel)

Summer 2016

God the King (1-2 Samuel)
God All Wise (1 Kings, Job,
Ecclesiastes, Psalms, Proverbs)

YEAR 2

Fall 2016

God the Revealer
(1-2 Kings, Isaiah)
God the Pursuer (Major
and Minor Prophets,
1-2 Chronicles)

Winter 2017

God the Sustainer
(Daniel, Ezra)
God the Provider (Esther,
Nehemiah, Malachi)

Spring 2017

God the Son (Gospels)
God Among Us (Gospels)

Summer 2017

Jesus the Storyteller
(Synoptic Gospels)
Jesus the Miracle-Worker
(Gospels)

YEAR 3

Fall 2017

Jesus the Savior (Gospels)
Jesus the Risen King
(Gospels, Acts)

Winter 2018

The Spirit Who
Empowers (Acts)
The God Who Sends (Acts)

Spring 2018

The God Who Directs His
People (Epistles)
The God Who Changes
Us (Epistles)

Summer 2018

God's Prisoner (Acts, Epistles)
The God Who Makes All
Things New (Epistles,
Revelation)