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PRODUCTION AND MINISTRY TEAM

VICE PRESIDENT, LIFEWAY RESOURCES: Eric Geiger

GENERAL EDITOR: Ed Stetzer

MANAGING EDITOR: Trevin Wax

CONTENT EDITOR: Andy McLean

MANAGER, STUDENT MINISTRY PUBLISHING: John Paul Basham

DIRECTOR, STUDENT MINISTRY: Ben Trueblood

Send questions/comments to: Content Editor, *The Gospel Project for Students Personal Study Guide*,
One LifeWay Plaza, Nashville, TN 37234-0144, Or make comments on the Web at www.lifeway.com

Send questions/comments to:

Content Editor, Andy McLean

The Gospel Project: Personal Study Guide,

One LifeWay Plaza, Nashville, TN 37234-0102;

or make comments on the Web at

www.lifeway.com.

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AUTHORS

UNIT 1



DANIEL AKIN (sessions 1-4) is the President of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and also a professor of preaching and theology. He received a PhD from the University of Texas at Arlington. He and his wife, Charlotte, have four grown children.



WALTER R. STRICKLAND II (sessions 5-6) serves as Special Advisor to the President for Diversity and Instructor of Theology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is pursuing a PhD from the University of Aberdeen. He and his wife, Stephanie, have three daughters, Hope, Kendra, and Kaiya.

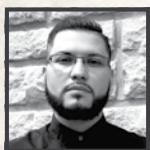
UNIT 2



JIMMY SCROGGINS (session 7) is the Lead Pastor of Family Church in West Palm Beach, Florida. He earned his MDiv and PhD from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He and his wife, Kristin, have eight children, James, Daniel, Jeremiah, Isaac, Stephen, Anna Kate, Mary Claire, and Caleb.



MATT CAPPS (sessions 8-10) is Senior Pastor of Fairview Baptist Church in Apex, North Carolina. He is working toward a DMin in pastoral ministry at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Matt and his wife, Laura, have three children, Solomon, Ruby, and Abby.



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.



ROBBY GALLATY (session 12) serves as the Senior Pastor of Long Hollow Baptist Church and President of Replicate Ministries. Robby holds a PhD, has written several books, and provides discipleship resources through Replicate Ministries. He and his wife, Kandi, have two young sons, Rig and Ryder.



REY DE ARMAS (Special Session) serves as one of the campus pastors at Christ Fellowship in Miami, leading the Coral Gables campus. He received an MDiv from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is married to Lauren, and they have two daughters, Zoe and Lexi.

HOW TO USE

01 SESSION ONE In a Foreign Land

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.

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, Babylon. Because of their hardness of heart and continual idols by giving them over to their enemies. At this point in the story the city had been captured, the temple ransacked, and the people of Jerusalem were in exile. Behind a frowning providence lie the doom and gloom of these events. God was still at work. He is present. In fact, He is ever-present with those whose hearts remain

INTRO

The first page of each session contains a brief overview of what to expect in the His Story section. This will include the Scripture passage(s), the main point, key figures, as well as a basic plot that sets the scene for the Bible study.

HIS STORY

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 exiled in the hands and wicked will of the Babylonian Empire. Though they were away from home, they were not outside the sovereign plan of God.

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.

- **What challenges do Christians face today that might lead them away from God?**

Daniel 1:1-7

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiachin King of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiachin 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 ration 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.

Daniel 1:8-16

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 to eat vegetables. 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 eat of your own food? 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.

DANIEL LIVES 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.

Notice how Daniel resisted the temptation to defile himself (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. 6:1-15), or it may have communicated an absolute allegiance to the king that Daniel reserved for God alone.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

New Identity of the Believer

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).



FAITHFUL IN EXILE
In God's ancient world, holiness, others take notice.



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



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



A FUTURE KING
Heavenly record of a future king coming from the line of David.

10 Session 1

The Gospel Project for Students 11

HIS STORY

Intended for group and personal use, the His Story section follows the storyline of the Bible, focusing on what God has done in redemptive history throughout the pages of Scripture. These pages also feature questions to engage with, Essential Doctrines to learn, and a visually helpful timeline to follow throughout the study. In addition, there is a Christ Connection section at the end, helping you to connect the dots between Jesus and the biblical storyline for each session.

THIS STUDY

Daniel 1:17-21
As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all dreams and visions. 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.

CHRIST CONNECTION
 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 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.



DANIEL IS DELIVERED
 God delivers Daniel in the lion's den.



THE JOURNEY HOME
 God sends the prophet to bring His people home.

12 Session 1

YOUR STORY

Intended for group and/or personal use, the Your Story section is designed to connect what God has done in the past to the present. As you discuss and answer these questions, you'll begin to realize that what God was doing in the lives of these biblical characters easily connects with life today.

YOUR MISSION

Also intended for group and/or personal use, 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 this day forward. It is intended to show that every session goes beyond mere Bible study to a calling to be on mission with God in this world.

YOUR STORY

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?

▶ 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?

▶ 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?

▶ How are you actively seeking God's wisdom in your own life?

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

YOUR MISSION

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 fast 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 didn'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?
- 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?

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.
- How would that situation have been different if you hadn't been grounded in your faith?

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?
- What does this account teach us about God's faithfulness in being with us when we feel as if we are living in exile?

14 Session 1

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.

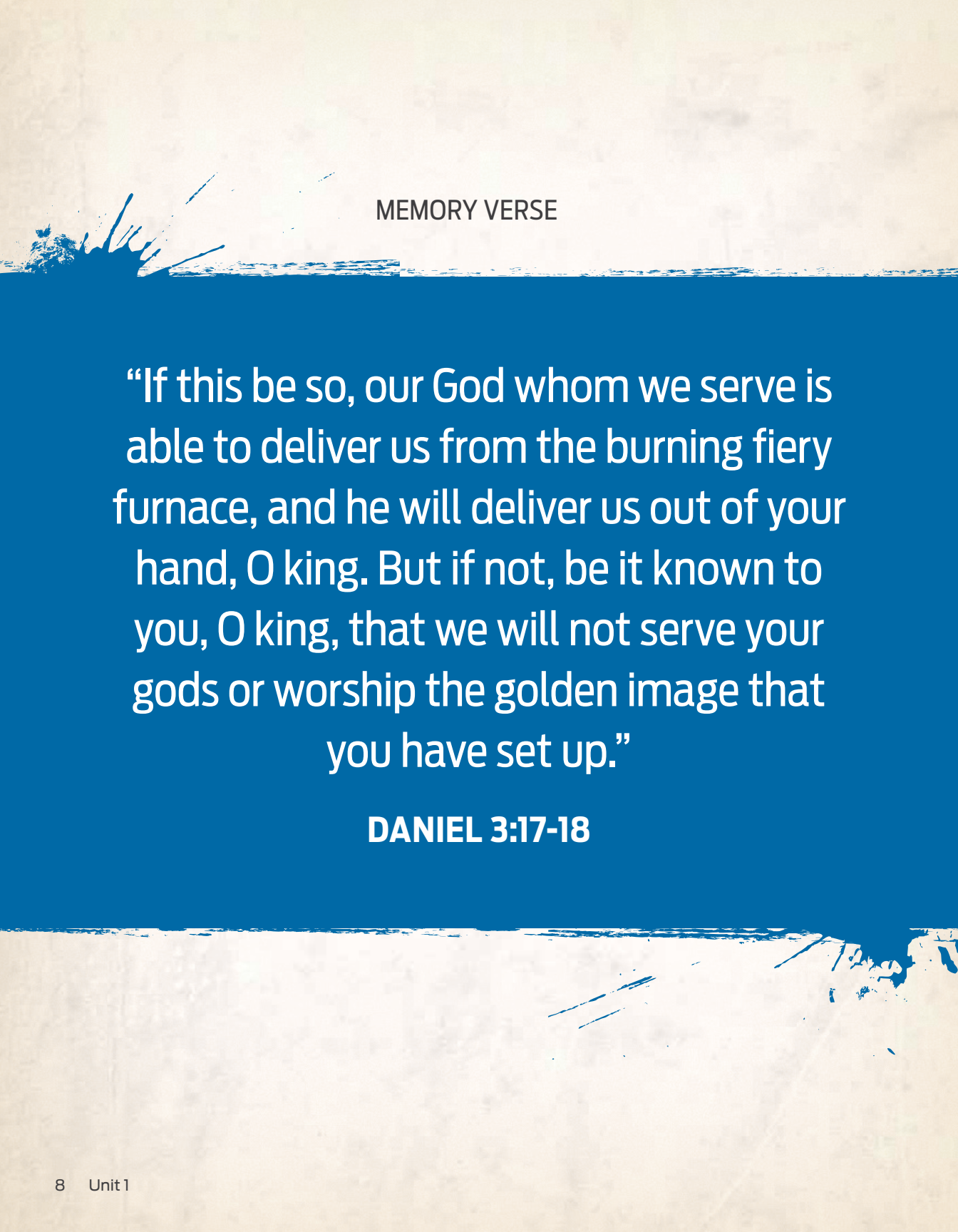
When we travel through the familiar stories that took place during this time period—stories like Daniel and the lions' den, or the furnace that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego faced, or even the risk-taking courage of Esther—we are quickly reminded that God is forever at work in His story of redemption. 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).

UNIT 1

God the Sustainer

EZRA, DANIEL



MEMORY VERSE

“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.”

DANIEL 3:17-18

01

SESSION ONE

In a Foreign Land

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.

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.

HIS STORY

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.

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- **What challenges do Christians face today that might lead them away from God?**

Daniel 1:1-7

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



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

Daniel 1:8-16

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.

DANIEL LIVES 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.

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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.

*Bonus session

Daniel 1:17-21

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.

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.

CHRIST CONNECTION

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.



DANIEL IS DELIVERED

God protects Daniel in the lions' den.



THE JOURNEY HOME

God keeps His promise to bring His people home.

YOUR STORY

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?**

- ▶ **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?**

- ▶ **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?**

- ▶ **How are you actively seeking God's wisdom in your own life?**

HIS STORY

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

YOUR STORY

*Where your story
meets His.*

YOUR MISSION



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?
- 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?



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.
- How would that situation have been different if you hadn’t been grounded in your faith?



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?
- What does this account teach us about God’s faithfulness in being with us when we feel as if we are living in exile?

02

SESSION TWO

Protection in the Furnace

SCRIPTURE

Daniel 3:8-30

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.

HIS STORY

Daniel 3:8-12

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."

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).

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.

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?

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).



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



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

Daniel 3:16-23

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.

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.

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).

Daniel 3:24-26

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.



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

**Bonus session*



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

- 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).

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

The Church and Kingdom

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.



THE JOURNEY HOME

God keeps His promise to bring His people home.



REBUILDING THE TEMPLE

Despite immense opposition the temple is rebuilt.

YOUR STORY

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?**
- ▶ **What are some ways Christians can demonstrate to their surrounding culture that their ultimate allegiance is to God, not men?**
- ▶ **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?**
- ▶ **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?**

HIS STORY

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

YOUR STORY

*Where your story
meets His.*

YOUR MISSION



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?
- What is the impact of sensing God's presence when you face difficulties?



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?
- How does the faith of these young Jewish men encourage you when it comes to dealing with pride in your own heart?



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?
- What are some ways we can encourage and support brothers and sisters in Christ around the world who face intense opposition to their faith?

03

SESSION THREE

The Handwriting on the Wall

SCRIPTURE

Daniel 5:1-9,13-31

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 handwriting on the wall. Though "wise men" were called, no one could interpret the message except Daniel.

HIS STORY

GOD RESPONDS 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.

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.

- **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?**
-
-

Daniel 5:1-9

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.



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



*Bonus session

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

Daniel 5:13-21

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.

DANIEL CONFRONTS 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.

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.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

God is Omnipotent

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



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



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

Daniel 5:25-31

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.”

DANIEL INTERPRETS GOD’S WARNING

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

Belshazzar showed no signs of repentance for his arrogance, blasphemies, idolatry, pride, and sensualities. He died that night, and 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.

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.



REBUILDING THE TEMPLE

Despite immense opposition the temple is rebuilt.



ESTHER RISKS IT ALL

God’s providential work in the life of Esther.

YOUR STORY

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?**

▶ **What are the major character distinctions between Daniel and Belshazzar? What kind of character shows up more in your own life, character like Daniel's or Belshazzar?**

▶ **When have you sensed God warning you away from sin or self-exaltation?**

▶ **What can we learn from this account when it comes to listening to God's wisdom over the wisdom of this world?**

HIS STORY

*God's Story of
Redemption, through
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YOUR STORY

*Where your story
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YOUR MISSION



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?
- Why can we have assurance that biblical wisdom will win every time, even over the best of human wisdom?



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?
- In what areas has pride surfaced in your own life?



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.
- Why is it important that we focus both on speaking truth and being gracious in the manner in which we speak?

04

SESSION FOUR

Protection in the Lions' Den

SCRIPTURE

Daniel 6:1-28

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.

HIS STORY

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.

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 6:4-10

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.



DANIEL IS DELIVERED

God protects Daniel in the lions' den.



THE JOURNEY HOME

God keeps His promise to bring His people home.

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.

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.

Daniel 6:15-18

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.

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.

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."



REBUILDING THE TEMPLE

Despite immense opposition the temple is rebuilt.



ESTHER RISKS IT ALL

God's providential work in the life of Esther.

Daniel 6:19-23

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.

- 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?

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Priesthood of the Believer

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!



HAMAN'S DOWNFALL

Haman's plot to destroy the Jews backfires.



NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER

God works through the prayers of His people.

YOUR STORY

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.)?**

- ▶ **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?**

- ▶ **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?**

- ▶ **As with Daniel, how can we make sure God receives the glory for who He is and what He has done for us?**

HIS STORY

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

YOUR STORY

*Where your story
meets His.*

YOUR MISSION



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.
- 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?



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?
- What are some ways you can cultivate humility in your own life?



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?
- How does Daniel's faithfulness challenge you to live out your own faith in the presence of others?

05

SESSION FIVE

God Brings His People Home

SCRIPTURE

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

THE POINT

Worshipping 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.

HIS STORY

GOD SENDS 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.

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.
-
-

Ezra 1:1-4

"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."



THE JOURNEY HOME

God keeps His promise to bring His people home.



REBUILDING THE TEMPLE

Despite immense opposition the temple is rebuilt.

Ezra 3:1-2

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.

THE PEOPLE JOURNEY BACK TO JERUSALEM AND WORSHIP 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.

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.

Ezra 3:8a

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.

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE TEMPLE BEGINS

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.

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.



ESTHER RISKS IT ALL

God's providential work in the life of Esther.



HAMAN'S DOWNFALL

Haman's plot to destroy the Jews backfires.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Preservation of Scripture

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.



NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER

God works through the prayers of His people.



THE WALL IS REBUILT

God restores the surrounding wall.

YOUR STORY

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?**

- ▶ **The people voluntarily gave of their resources for the construction of the temple. How is the giving of our resources an act of worship?**

- ▶ **What does this account teach us about worshiping God?**

- ▶ **What does this account teach us about outward displays of worship?**

HIS STORY

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

YOUR STORY

*Where your story
meets His.*

YOUR MISSION



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 worshiping 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?
- What are some ways Christians can communicate living a better way to our surrounding culture today?



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?
- 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?



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?
- 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?

06

SESSION SIX

The Rebuilding of the Temple

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.

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.

HIS STORY

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.

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.

Ezra 4:1-7

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.



REBUILDING THE TEMPLE

Despite immense opposition the temple is rebuilt.



ESTHER RISKS IT ALL

God's providential work in the life of Esther.

- 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?

GOD'S PEOPLE LISTENED TO GOD'S WORD

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.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Inerrancy of Scripture

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).

Ezra 5:1-5

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.



HAMAN'S DOWNFALL

Haman's plot to destroy the Jews backfires.



NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER

God works through the prayers of His people.

THE TEMPLE WAS FINALLY REBUILT

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.

Ezra 5:13-15

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. 14 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; 15 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.

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.



THE WALL IS REBUILT

God restores the surrounding wall.



THE CENTRALITY OF THE WORD

The people gather to hear God's Word.

YOUR STORY

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?**
- ▶ **What are the warning signs of someone with spiritual apathy?**
- ▶ **What role does Scripture play in helping us overcome this apathy in our own lives?**
- ▶ **How has this session challenged you when it comes to dealing with opposition to your faith in your own life?**

HIS STORY

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

YOUR STORY

*Where your story
meets His.*

YOUR MISSION



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?
- How can Christians guard themselves from falling for such distractions?



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?
- Why should Christians turn their attention to God's Word when battling against spiritual apathy?



HANDS

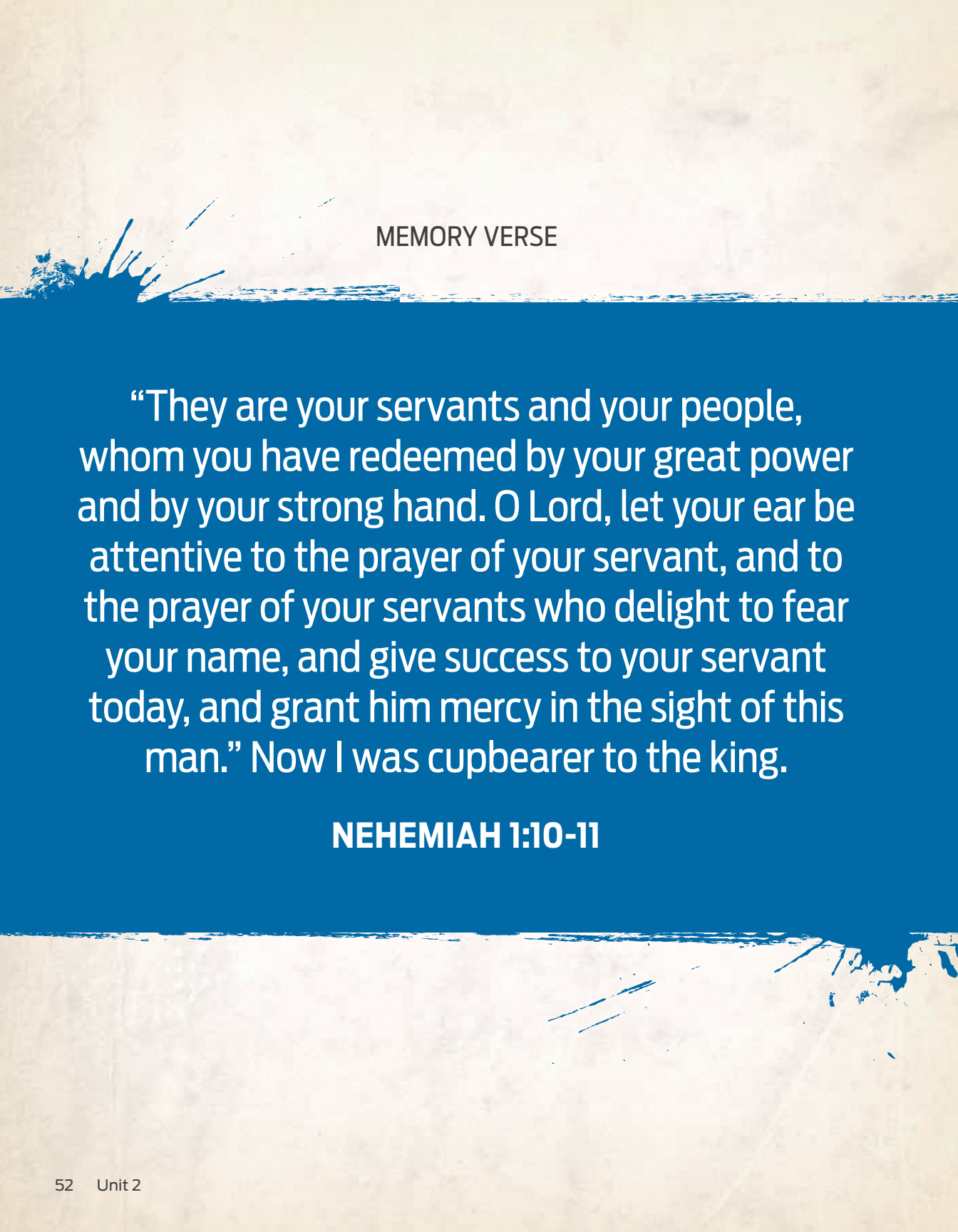
In a society where tolerance and openness are seen as absolute values, Christians face the ever-present danger of compromising their beliefs. We are pressured to minimize the differences between Christianity and other faiths, as if all religious beliefs are basically the same. But this jumbled thinking 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?
- 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?

UNIT 2

God the Provider

EZRA, ESTHER, NEHEMIAH, MALACHI



MEMORY VERSE

“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.

NEHEMIAH 1:10-11

07

SESSION SEVEN

Esther (Part I)

SCRIPTURE

Esther 4

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.

HIS STORY

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.

- **When have you felt like an “outsider” because of your faith? How do you respond in these situations?**
-
-

Esther 4:1-7

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.



ESTHER RISKS IT ALL

God's providential work in the life of Esther.



HAMAN'S DOWNFALL

Haman's plot to destroy the Jews backfires.

Esther 4:8-14

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?"

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.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

God's Providence

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.



NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER

God works through the prayers of His people.



THE WALL IS REBUILT

God restores the surrounding wall.

ESTHER RISKED HER LIFE FOR THE SAKE OF HER PEOPLE

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).

Esther 4:15-17

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.

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.



THE CENTRALITY OF THE WORD

The people gather to hear God’s Word.



SHALLOW WORSHIP

The people fail to give God their very best.

YOUR STORY

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?**

- ▶ **How can we encourage each other to seek the Lord when His hand of providence is hidden from our view?**

- ▶ **What are some aspects of your past that you've seen God use to make you more effective in serving Him?**

- ▶ **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?**

HIS STORY

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

YOUR STORY

*Where your story
meets His.*

YOUR MISSION



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?
- How does her story strengthen your confidence that God is near and cares for you?



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?
- What are some examples in Scripture that you can point to for encouragement when wondering if God is near?



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?
- When have you felt like you were put somewhere “for such a time as this” to do God’s will?

08

SESSION EIGHT

Esther (Part II)

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.

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.

HIS STORY

HAMAN'S PLAN AGAINST MORDECAI BACKFIRED

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.

Esther 6:6-11

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.”



HAMAN'S DOWNFALL

Haman's plot to destroy the Jews backfires.



NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER

God works through the prayers of His people.

Esther 7:3-10

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.

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.

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.

- 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?



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

Christ's Humiliation

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).

GOD'S PEOPLE EXPERIENCED VICTORY OVER THEIR ENEMIES

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' 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.

Esther 9:1-2

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.

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.



SHALLOW WORSHIP
The people fail to give God their very best.



**Beginning Spring 2017*

FROM ABRAHAM TO JESUS
The arrival of the Promised One.

YOUR STORY

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?**
- ▶ **How does an eternal perspective help us persevere and trust in God while we are in the middle of tough situations?**
- ▶ **How does Esther's courage and willingness to take risks challenge you in your walk with Christ?**
- ▶ **What does this session teach us about humility and pride, especially as shown within the lives of Esther and Haman?**

HIS STORY

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

YOUR STORY

*Where your story
meets His.*

YOUR MISSION



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?
- How does the promise of future victory help you deal with defeat 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?
- 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?



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?
- Like Esther and Mordecai, how will you take risks in your own life for God's glory and the good of others?

09

SESSION NINE

The Prayers of Nehemiah

SCRIPTURE

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

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.

HIS STORY

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 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?**

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.

- **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?**

Nehemiah 1:1-4

The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month of Chisleu, 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.



NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER

God works through the prayers of His people.



THE WALL IS REBUILT

God restores the surrounding wall.

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.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Prayer and Providence

If God is in control and already knows the future, why pray? The Bible teaches that, although God has a plan for this world that He promises to fulfill, prayer is often the means God uses to accomplish His divine purpose. Even though God 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.

Nehemiah 1:5-11

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.



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 2:1-8

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.

NEHEMIAH PRAYED WHILE HE TOOK ACTION

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.

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 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 that hears and bears our burdens today (Ps. 68:19). Similarly, we can rest assured that Jesus hears our cry for salvation and answers it.



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MARY PRAISES GOD

*God works in the heart
and life of Mary.*

YOUR STORY

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?**

▶ **When you are struck with fear, anxiety, or insecurity, what is your first response? What or who do you typically reach for? How is Nehemiah's example instructive for us?**

▶ **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 with eyes closed and heads bowed?**

▶ **How does our understanding 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?**

HIS STORY

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

YOUR STORY

*Where your story
meets His.*

YOUR MISSION



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?
- How does it encourage you to know that God works through your prayers to answer them?



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?
- What does it say about us if we know God's loving forgiveness but don't seek to follow Him in obedience?



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?
- 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?

10

SESSION TEN

The Rebuilding of the Wall

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.

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.

HIS STORY

NEHEMIAH CALLED THE PEOPLE TO ACT WISELY

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.

- What are the “wise” aspects you see in Nehemiah's response to the opposition he faced? What would have been an unwise response?

Nehemiah 4:7-14

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.”



THE WALL IS REBUILT
God restores the surrounding wall.



THE CENTRALITY OF THE WORD
The people gather to hear God's Word.

Nehemiah 5:1-6

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.

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, but also an environment where God's laws could be enforced and where His justice could be upheld.

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 6:15-16

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.



SHALLOW WORSHIP

The people fail to give God their very best.



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99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Social Concern

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).

CHRIST CONNECTION

Nehemiah's exhortation to not fear, and to trust and obey, stands as a comforting testimony to Christian's 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.



MARY PRAISES GOD

God works in the heart and life of Mary.



GOD WITH US

The good news of Jesus' Incarnation.

YOUR STORY

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?**

- ▶ **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?**

- ▶ **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?**

- ▶ **When have you seen God do something so amazing that you realized "only God could have done this?"**

HIS STORY

*God's Story of
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YOUR STORY

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YOUR MISSION



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?
- What are some ways to identify any blind spots of sin that you may not be aware of?



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?
- Why should this strengthen your own belief in God's promises to you found in Scripture?



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?
- Why is it important to give God glory for the success we experience?

11

SESSION ELEVEN

God's People Gather

SCRIPTURE

Nehemiah 8:1-12

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.

HIS STORY

Nehemiah 8:1-2

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.

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. The Law required the nation to gather to hear the Word of God read every seven years (Deut. 31:9-13).

- **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?**



THE CENTRALITY OF THE WORD

The people gather to hear God's Word.



SHALLOW WORSHIP

The people fail to give God their very best.

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.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Inspiration of Scripture

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.

Nehemiah 8:3-6

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, Anajah, Uria, 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.



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MARY PRAISES GOD

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Nehemiah 8:7-12

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.

GOD'S PEOPLE RESPOND IN REPENTANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

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, in exile 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 the 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.

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).



GOD WITH US
The good news of
Jesus' Incarnation.



JESUS' EARLY YEARS
Jesus grows in favor
with God and men.

YOUR STORY

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 fresh hunger and thirst for God's Word?**

- ▶ **What are some ways we can hold each other accountable as we seek to obey God's Word?**

- ▶ **What benefits follow from reading and studying God's Word?**

- ▶ **How has this session encouraged or challenged you when it comes to your own personal study time in God's Word?**

HIS STORY


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

YOUR STORY

*Where your story
meets His.*

YOUR MISSION


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?
- What are some ways we can increase our desire to read and listen to God's 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?
- 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?

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?
- When have you helped someone else understand something in Scripture?

12

SESSION TWELVE

The Warning Against Shallow Worship

SCRIPTURE

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

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.

HIS STORY

Malachi 1:6-9

“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.

THE PEOPLE COMMITTED SHALLOW WORSHIP

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?
 - How can you guard against this in your own life?
-
-



SHALLOW WORSHIP

The people fail to give God their very best.



**Beginning Spring 2017*

FROM ABRAHAM TO JESUS

The arrival of the Promised One.

Malachi 3:7-12

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.

THEIR SHALLOW WORSHIP MINIMIZED GOD'S WORTH

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.

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.

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."



MARY PRAISES GOD

God works in the heart and life of Mary.



GOD WITH US

The good news of Jesus' Incarnation.

Malachi 4:1-6

“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.””

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

Worship

While many reduce worship to an event or the singing of worship songs, worship is first and foremost something of the heart and extends to all areas of life. The aim and focus of worship is God, giving Him the 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.



JESUS' EARLY YEARS

Jesus grows in favor with God and men.



JESUS' BAPTISM

The meaning of baptism in the life of the believer.

YOUR STORY

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?**
- ▶ **What are some areas of life where students struggle to give God their best?**
- ▶ **How does this passage relate to Jesus' words about our hearts being where our treasure is?**
- ▶ **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?**

HIS STORY

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

YOUR STORY

*Where your story
meets His.*

YOUR MISSION

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?
- What are some ways this idea could be misunderstood and misapplied?

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?
- What do we communicate about our view of God and His grace toward us when we fail to give Him our very best?

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?
- How might your blessing others in this way point them to Christ?