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Ezra & Nehemiah

God's Builders



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Elder Holbrook and his wife, Donna, a former schoolteacher, have three adult children.

Check with your local Adventist Book Center for the companion book to the Sabbath School lessons.

God's Builders

Messages from Ezra and Nehemiah

Political plots, social and economic unrest. Headlines from today's newspaper? Yes. But they also describe events in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. These books also tell of brave Jewish patriots who faced huge obstacles. Through prayer and grace they reestablished the remnant of Israel as a group dedicated to fulfilling God's will for them. Their courage and resolve have a message for the "remnant" church today.

The common theme that runs through Ezra and Nehemiah (considered one book by the Jews) is "building." Zerubbabel labored to build a temple. Nehemiah restored a city's walls and gates. Ezra and Nehemiah reestablished Israel as a theocracy. This common theme of "building" touches upon other themes, including revival, obedience to God's law, prayer, church unity, and leadership.

During the times of Ezra and Nehemiah the political structures of the Near East tumbled; Babylonian might crumbled before the victorious armies of Cyrus. The bonds of exile suddenly dropped away as Persian kings permitted God's people to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple, capital, and political economy.

"Although the double book Ezra-Nehemiah does not claim to have been written in its entirety by Ezra, there is nothing in it which could not have been written by him."—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 319. Because Ezra was a scribe, it would not have been unusual for him to preserve for posterity the far-reaching events of his time.

OUTLINE OF EZRA-NEHEMIAH

- I. Return of the Jews Under Zerubbabel (Ezra 1:1-2:70).
- II. Rebuilding the Temple Begins (Ezra 3:1-4:24).
- III. Completing the Temple (Ezra 5:1-6:22).
- IV. Return of More Jews Under Ezra (Ezra 7:1-8:36).
- V. Ezra Deals With Mixed Marriages (Ezra 9:1-10:44).
- VI. Nehemiah Learns of Jerusalem's Plight (Neh. 1:1-2:11).
- VII. Rebuilding Jerusalem's Walls (Neh. 2:12-6:19).
- VIII. Reading and Explaining the Law (Neh. 7:1-8:18).
- IX. Renewing the Covenant (Neh. 9:1-10:39).
- X. Dedicating Jerusalem's Walls (Neh. 11:1-12:43).
- XI. Arranging for Temple Services (Neh. 12:44-47).
- XII. Nehemiah's Second Period as Governor (Neh. 13:1-31).

Builders for God



Sabbath Afternoon

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Ezra 2:1, 2; 3:8; 7:6, 11; Neh. 1:11; 5:14; 8:1, 2; Dan. 8:2-4, 20; Haggai 1:1.

MEMORY TEXT: "I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me" (Isaiah 6:8).

KEY QUESTIONS: Who is a builder for God? Why can ordinary persons do great deeds for God and others?

TRUE BUILDERS. In 1976, an earthquake devastated Guatemala City, leaving thousands of children without families. At the request of Elder Robert Folkenberg, then president of the Adventist work in Central America, Ken and Alcyon Fleck organized an orphanage. "After visiting Guatemala, . . . Alcyon Fleck concluded that 'there were so many starving, lonely children, I just couldn't leave them all there with no hope for the future.'" —*Mission* (first quarter, 1992), p. 19. Since then, the Flecks' organization, International Children's Care, has established orphanages in the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, Honduras, Mexico, and Romania. The Flecks are true builders for God.

In our lesson this week we will study the characteristics of several persons who were great builders for God—persons who led captive Israel out of Babylonian captivity, then assisted in the reconstruction of God's remnant people.

PANORAMA OF THE PERSIAN PERIOD (Dan. 8:2-4, 20).

Read the visions recorded in Daniel 2:32, 37-39; 7:5; and 8:2-4. These visions indicated that the kingdom succeeding Babylon would be a combination of two political powers: the Medes and the Persians. The bear, raising itself on one side, and the two horns of the ram, one higher than the other, symbolized this dual nature. The prophecy forecast the eventual dominance of Persia. Read in Daniel 5:1, 5, 24-28, 30 how Belshazzar was informed about the collapse of Babylon to the Medes and Persians.

"In that last night of mad folly, Belshazzar and his lords had filled up the measure of their guilt and the guilt of the Chaldean kingdom."—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 530.

What remarkable prophecy, written 150 years earlier, was fulfilled on the night Babylon fell, thus preparing the way for the revival of the Jewish nation? Isa. 44:27, 28; 45:1-5; see also Jer. 51:30-32.

The Greek historians Herodotus and Xenophon state that the armies of Cyrus changed the flow of the Euphrates River so that his troops could enter Babylon on the old river bed. The river gates, being open because of the night's festivities, permitted the attackers to enter the city without opposition.

Seven books of the Bible either refer to the first five or six emperors of the Persian Empire or focus on the experience of God's people during their rule (Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi). While these scriptures cover the experiences of Israel during the 100 years following their return from captivity, the Persian Empire itself lasted for a little over 200 years. Surely this empire had an important part in God's plan to prepare the world for the Messiah's coming.

What similarities for the spread of the gospel do you see between the fall of ancient Babylon and the present political climate of Eastern Europe and China?

When world affairs seem out of control, why is it good to recall such prophecies as Daniel 8:2-4 and Jeremiah 51:30, 31?

ZERUBBABEL: TEMPLE BUILDER (Ezra 3:8).

Old Testament prophets compared the exodus from Babylon with the Exodus from Egypt (Isa. 11:11, 12, 16). Look for these similarities as you continue your study.

Whom did Cyrus, the Persian king, appoint as governor over the Jews, charging him to rebuild the temple? Ezra 5:13-16. Why might the king have chosen him?

Most Bible references acknowledge Zerubbabel as governor and builder of the temple (Haggai 1:1; 2:21). The name Sheshbazzar is probably a name by which he was known to the Babylonians and Persians. Remember that Daniel's captors gave him and his companions other names (Dan. 1:7). A "prince of Judah," Zerubbabel was a grandson of Jehoiachin (Jeconiah), the king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar took into captivity after only three months on the throne in 597 B.C. (1 Chron. 3:17-19; 2 Kings 24:8-16).

Cyrus probably chose Zerubbabel with the thought that the Jews would rally around a "prince of the blood." But we have no reason to think that he was a man of great wealth or extraordinary ability. After all, he was an exile of a defunct nation. Yet he must have enjoyed the confidence of his kinsmen in captivity. They would have respected him as a descendant of the old Jewish nobility and the Davidic house.

What major tasks did Cyrus give to Zerubbabel? Ezra 5:13-16.

God appointed Moses, Aaron, and Miriam (Micah 6:4) to lead Israel from Egypt to Canaan. In Israel's second exodus (from Babylon), Zerubbabel, the governor, and Joshua, the high priest, led out in a similar manner. Assisted by 10 others (Ezra 2:2), Zerubbabel organized nearly 50,000 persons and more than 8,000 animals to travel from Babylon to Judah (Ezra 2:64-67), a trek that took four months. And just as Moses and the Israelites built the sanctuary, so did Zerubbabel and the exiles from Babylon rebuild the temple.

How are you a prince or princess of the blood? (See Eph. 1:3-5.) Can God depend upon you as He depended upon Zerubbabel?

JOSHUA: HIGH PRIEST AND INTERCESSOR (Ezra 2:2; Haggai 1:1).

Joshua, Zerubbabel's associate, was another of God's timely "builders." What claim did he have to his position? Ezra 3:2; Haggai 1:1; 1 Chron. 6:3-15.

Joshua traced his lineage back to Aaron through Aaron's son Eleazar. Cyrus evidently chose Joshua to be the high priest of the new temple, since he was the legitimate person for the office according to Mosaic law.

What assurance did God give Joshua and the returned exiles in response to Joshua's prayers on behalf of the nation? Zech. 3:1-7.

"As the intercession of Joshua is accepted, the command is given, 'Take away the filthy garments from him;' and to Joshua the Angel says, 'Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with change of raiment.' 'So they set a fair miter upon his head, and clothed him with garments.' . . . His own sins and those of his people were pardoned. Israel was clothed with 'change of raiment'—the righteousness of Christ imputed to them. The miter placed upon Joshua's head was such as were worn by the priests, and bore the inscription, 'Holiness to the Lord,' signifying that notwithstanding his former transgressions, he was now qualified to minister before God in His sanctuary."—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 584.

Local opposition from the Samaritans and political opposition in the empire hindered the work on the temple until it stopped altogether. In discouragement the people turned to their own interests for sixteen years (Haggai 1:2-4).

What finally aroused Joshua and Zerubbabel to encourage the people to return to their work on the Lord's temple? Ezra 5:1, 2 (compare Haggai 1:1-8, 12; Zech. 4:1-10).

Joshua and Zerubbabel willingly responded to the counsels of the prophets. Likewise, God has given us counsels and encouragement through the prophet Ellen White. How has this gift assisted you in your relationship with the Saviour?

EZRA: PRIEST AND SCRIBE OF THE LAW (Ezra 7:6, 11).

About 80 years after the first group of Jews had returned to Judah under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Joshua, Ezra led a second migration estimated to have numbered about 8,000.

How does Ezra identify himself and his work? Ezra 7:1-5, 11.

"Born of the sons of Aaron, Ezra had been given a priestly training; and in addition to this he had acquired a familiarity with the writings of the magicians, the astrologers, and the wise men of the Medo-Persian realm. But he was not satisfied with his spiritual condition. He longed to be in full harmony with God; he longed for wisdom to carry out the divine will. And so he 'prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it.' . . . Ezra's heart was stirred. He experienced a new and thorough conversion, and determined to master the records of sacred history that he might use this knowledge to bring blessing and light to his people."—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 608.

How did Ezra begin to make the Word of God a prominent force in the life of the emerging nation? Neh. 8:1-3.

"What is strikingly apparent is the royal reception given to the Word of God. This day was to prove a turning-point. From now on the Israelites would be predominantly 'the people of a book.' At the dedication of Solomon's Temple there had been glory and beauty, natural and supernatural, to overwhelm the worshippers. Here the focus, apart from a wooden platform, was a scroll—or more exactly, what was written in it. Its opening brought the people to their feet."—Derek Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1979), pp. 105, 106.

The greatness of Ezra's influence lay in his passion for studying God's Word so he would know his Lord. List some factors that help us develop a hunger for Bible study. Identify some things that take away our desire for the Word. What could you do this week to become a better student of the Book?

NEHEMIAH: GOVERNOR AND KING'S HELPER (Neh. 1:11; 5:14).

Twelve or 13 years after Ezra arrived in Jerusalem, the new Persian king, Artaxerxes I, appointed Nehemiah as governor of Judah (Neh. 5:14).

What did Nehemiah do in the king's court? Neh. 1:11.

According to Herodotus, the Greek historian, the office of cupbearer was a great honor. It was the responsibility of this officer to protect the monarch from being poisoned. That Nehemiah was the king's cupbearer indicates that he was a man of integrity. In God's providence, both Ezra and Nehemiah were trained in the court of Persia for their major roles in reestablishing God's people in Judah.

What admirable characteristics of Nehemiah can you identify? Neh. 1:3, 4, 11; 2:17.

Nehemiah was a man of deep piety who grieved for the plight of God's people in Jerusalem. But this grief did not cause him to act without thinking. Having considered all the options, he carefully laid his plans."

"As important as the news itself is the manner of Nehemiah's reaction to it. Despite having the ear of the king, and the fact that . . . he himself is by disposition a man of action, he turns first to God and to prayer."—J. G. McConville, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther* (Edinburgh, Scotland: The Saint Andrew Press, 1985), p. 75.

How do you react to troubling news or situations? Do you pray immediately? Of what advantage would prayer be in such circumstances?

"To pray as Nehemiah prayed in his hour of need is a resource at the command of the Christian. . . . In every circumstance, under every condition, the soul weighed down with grief and care, or fiercely assailed by temptation, may find assurance, support, and succor in the unfailing love and power of a covenant-keeping God."—*Prophets and Kings*, pp. 631, 632.

FURTHER STUDY: This week we saw that God has builders to match the times. Read Genesis 6:13, 14, 22; Luke 1:26-38; Acts 8:26-40. (1) In each set of texts, who is the "builder"? (2) What made him/her a "builder" for God? (3) What traits of Zerubbabel, Joshua, Ezra, and Nehemiah did each display?

Read "Not by Might, nor by Power" in *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 593-597.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Do you see things that need to change in your church? How can you accomplish this as Nehemiah did without being abrasive and harsh?
2. Recite this week's Memory Text. When the Lord asks, "Whom shall I send?" are you quick to respond, "Send me"? How can you be a builder for God?

SUMMARY: God has His "builders." Humble, sensitive to the counsels of the prophetic gift, deep students of the Word, persons of faith, earnest prayer, and action, God's builders from all walks of life hear His call in the great needs of His people and give of themselves wholeheartedly to meet the challenges.

Going Home



Sabbath Afternoon

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Ezra 1, 2.

MEMORY TEXT: "When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing" (Psalm 126:1, 2).

KEY QUESTION: Permission to return to Judah surprised and excited the exiles, yet only a minority actually went home. Likewise, God's people will be delirious with happiness when Jesus appears in glory. What preparation is necessary for you to take part in heaven's homecoming?

A DREAM COME TRUE. On November 12, 1989, a crane yanked sections of concrete out of the Berlin Wall as a dentist extracts decayed teeth. Minutes later, Bernd and Cornelia Platt from East Germany walked through the gap. "It's like realizing a dream," Bernd said. Yet with the freedom to move now a real choice, these young professionals decided to continue living where they had been. The security of home and jobs kept them from moving.

When the winds of strife brought immense changes in the Near East in 539 B.C., the Jewish exiles suddenly found themselves able to return to Judah. Most, however, chose to remain in Babylon because they had grown comfortable in their communities. This week we will focus on those who decided to make the dream of returning home come true.

PRAYER PREPARATION (Dan. 9:1-19).

Daniel's name does not appear in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, but therein we may trace his fingerprints. Above all, his earnest, intercessory prayers pervade the records of Ezra 1.

How did the onset of the Medo-Persian kingdom affect Daniel? Dan. 9:1-3 (see also Jer. 29:10-14).

Daniel and his Hebrew friends often must have pondered Israel's destiny. How could they tell others about the Messiah while those others were still apostatizing? How could Jerusalem become their missionary center while they were still in captivity? Daniel himself was in the first group of captives taken to Babylon (605 B.C.), and the ascension of Darius the Mede to the former throne of Babylon prompted him to restudy Jeremiah's prophecies.

What was the substance of Daniel's prayer? Dan. 9:4-15, 20.

Daniel was not a priest, "but it is one of the glories of Scripture that no special permission is required for intercession on behalf of others. . . . Thanks to the study of 'the books' and the habit of prayer three times a day, . . . the instructed Jew was not at a loss when he came to put his prayer into words."—Joyce G. Baldwin, *Daniel*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1978), p. 165.

Why did Daniel earnestly desire God to honor His promise to restore Israel after 70 years? Dan. 9:18, 19.

Daniel expresses no selfish interest in his prayer. His concern is for the honor of God. Even though the sinful people of Israel have brought reproach and embarrassment upon the nation, it is really the true God they have dishonored before the pagan world.

Are you in a situation that is holding you captive? How can Israel's captivity and release help you?

PERSIAN PERMISSION (Ezra 1:1-4).

Although Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon in 539 B.C., he remained the power behind the throne of Darius the Mede for more than a year. He issued his decree for the Jews to rebuild the temple at Jerusalem in the summer of 537 B.C.

What motivated Cyrus to issue this proclamation? What evidence is there that someone had shown Isaiah's prophecy to the king? Ezra 1:1, 2; Isa. 44:24-28; 45:1-5, 13.

In his proclamation, Cyrus acknowledged that Yahweh had charged him to build His temple at Jerusalem. Such a charge appears only in the prophecy of Isaiah. A person who had a scroll of Isaiah and who had intimate access to the king probably showed Cyrus the divine message. Thus in Cyrus' decree we may see the traces of Daniel's influence.

What event during the reign of Darius the Mede opened a door for Daniel to reach Cyrus? Daniel 6.

"The deliverance of Daniel from the den of lions had been used of God to create a favorable impression upon the mind of Cyrus the Great. The sterling qualities of the man of God as a statesman of farseeing ability led the Persian ruler to show him marked respect and to honor his judgment."—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 557.

Scholars used to question the validity of Cyrus' decree. They found it difficult to believe that he would take such an interest in an insignificant captive nation. But an archeological discovery tells us this in Cyrus' own words: "I returned to these sacred cities on the other side of the Tigris, the sanctuaries of which have been in ruins for a long time, the images which used to live in them, and I established for them permanent sanctuaries. I also gathered all their former inhabitants and returned to them their habitations."—"Cyrus Cylinder," *The Biblical World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1966), p. 178.

The second temple was financed largely by a pagan government. Is it proper for the church today to accept government money for its institutions?

READY RESPONSE (Ezra 1:5, 6).

Who in particular responded to Cyrus' decree? What was the driving force behind their decision? Ezra 1:5.

Ezra lifts the veil so that we may see the operation of the unseen heavenly realm. It was God who "stirred" up Cyrus (Ezra 1:1), and God who "raised" His people to respond.

How did the Jews and their non-Jewish acquaintances in their communities respond in a material way to this challenging venture? Ezra 1:6.

The time of departure from Babylon was probably the spring of 536 B.C. This gave the leaders and the people who would join the great migration to Palestine approximately a year to prepare for the trek. During these months, they received gifts of gold, silver, and other necessities in addition to the horses, mules, asses, and camels for transportation.

What special treasures did Cyrus order his treasurer, Mithredath, to entrust to Zerubbabel (Sheshbazzar)? Ezra 1:7-11. Under what circumstances had some of these same treasures been used only two years earlier? Dan. 5:1-4, 23.

The meaning of the Hebrew words that designate some of these items is not clear, nor is it certain just how they arrived at the total figures (see *SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 329). But how quickly a situation can change! As they praised their idols, Belshazzar of Babylon and his lords, wives, and concubines drank wine from sacred vessels once used in services that pointed to the Lamb of God. Only two years later, Persia was returning these vessels to the temple that the government would help to build!

The Holy Spirit is moving in the earth today, preparing people of all nationalities for Christ's coming. Led by the Spirit, approximately 1,500 persons are joining the Advent people every day. Are you aware of the Spirit's presence, and do you desire Him to prepare you for your spiritual journey to Zion? What can you do this week to be more involved in preparing others for the journey?

MIGRATING MULTITUDES (Ezra 2:1-67).

Read Ezra 2:1, 64. Between these two verses is a record of the first group of exiles from Babylon. Why did Ezra compile such an extensive list?

These people are the living "roots" of what was to be. Such details seem dry to us, but at that point in Israel's history they were essential. God had originally separated Israel from the nations for a holy purpose: to be "an holy people unto the Lord thy God" (Deut. 7:6). So Ezra needed to determine from the records who were "the holy seed" (Ezra 9:2) who would replant the nation.

These basic groups are evident in the list:

- (1) The leadership (Ezra 2:2; Neh. 7:7), representing "the men of the people of Israel."
- (2) Descendants from a pre-captivity ancestor (Ezra 2:3-19).
- (3) Descendants from pre-captivity cities (2:20-35).
- (4) Priests descended from pre-captive families (2:36-39).
- (5) Levites descended from pre-captive families (2:40-42).
- (6) Nethinim and Solomon's servants (2:43-58). The ancestors of these temple servants were apparently captives (such as the Gibeonites) or remnants of the Canaanites whom Moses, Joshua, David, and Solomon dedicated to the temple to perform menial tasks under the direction of the priests and Levites. The word *Nethinim* means "the given ones."

What happened to those groups who couldn't prove they were of Israelite or priestly stock? Ezra 2:59-63.

More than 600 persons could not identify themselves as Israelites of the blood. It is possible they were attracted to God's people like the mixed multitude who joined Israel in the Exodus from Egypt (Ex. 12:38). Those claiming to be priests were not permitted to serve until God gave permission.

Read Revelation 21:26, 27. What similarities exist between these verses and our lesson for today? (See also John 5:24; Heb. 12:22, 23; Rev. 3:5.)

CHEERFUL GIVERS (Ezra 2:68-70).

Ezra lists the returning Israelites by family, city, or office, but he is silent on character and motive. What kinds of people were likely to come on this journey and why?

If a Jewish captive were 20 years of age in 605, 597, or 586 B.C. (the dates of the three major deportations), he or she would be 88, 80, and 69, respectively, in 537 B.C., the year of release. It is not likely that many of the elderly from the first deportation would be physically able to make the return trip. Some of the older persons from the third deportation might have returned. Those persons who were strongly religious (young or old) and/or nationalist in spirit would return. The priests, Levites, and temple servants were naturally attracted, since the new temple would allow them to work at their ancestral careers. Finally, the poor—who had nothing to lose—were also likely attracted.

Before separating to their respective ancestral towns, this diverse group assembled at the ruins of Solomon's temple (Ezra 2:68, 70). In their joy upon a safe arrival, what did they do? Ezra 2:68, 69.

While this large sum of gold, silver, and priestly garments was a freewill offering, it probably reflects some of the gifts given by the Jews and their friends in Babylon and elsewhere. Cyrus' grant to finance the construction of the temple created a generous spirit in these patriots.

Furthermore, while suffering the reproach of captivity, it appears that the Israelites took Jeremiah's counsel to heart to settle into the land of their sojourn (Jer. 29:4-7). Excavations at Nippur, the area of Ezekiel's home during the exile, have uncovered the archives of a large banking firm, "Murashu Sons." Thousands of tablets contain more than one hundred Jewish names, indicating that some Israelites became a wealthy, influential minority in Persia. Their success is reflected in the grand freewill offering they gave for the new temple in Jerusalem.

Why would God prefer that we give little with a cheerful heart than much with complaining? (Compare 2 Cor. 9:6, 7.)

FURTHER STUDY: This week we learned that the Holy Spirit motivated the return to Jerusalem. Read more about the work of the Holy Spirit in Isaiah 59:19; John 6:63; 14:18, 23, 26; 16:8, 14; Romans 8:26, 27.

Read "The Return of the Exiles" in *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 551-560, and "Pray for the Latter Rain" in *Testimonies to Ministers*, pp. 506-512.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How can you contribute to a spiritual revival among God's people?
2. How "pure" should a Christian congregation keep its books? What are the functions of discipline and disfellowshipping?

SUMMARY: Multitudes headed home from Babylonian exile. Seventh-day Adventist Christians are heading home too. Doors long shut are opening in all the world, providing the gospel with new avenues of access. This is the hour to fall to our knees and plead for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit to empower us to fulfill our mission and prepare for the great homecoming in the heavenly Jerusalem!



- **What is homosexuality?**
- **What are its causes?**
- **What do the Scriptures teach about homosexuality?**

Written by Ronald M. Springett, PhD., *Homosexuality in History and the Scriptures* examines the current discussion from an Adventist point of view.

\$6.95. 173 pages. Order from your ABC or the Biblical Research Institute, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904-6600.

Always Available



Sabbath Afternoon

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Ezra 3, 4; Daniel 10.

MEMORY TEXT: "And they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto the Lord; because he is good, for his mercy endureth for ever toward Israel" (Ezra 3:11).

KEY QUESTIONS: Why is it true that many endeavors for the Lord meet with obstacles? How should we confront challenges that threaten the progress of His cause?

GOD IS WITH US ALWAYS. When Chip was a boy, it seemed that sickness would be his way of life. He remembers how fever, pneumonia, or other serious illness plagued his childhood. In the long, restless nights he would awaken from a half-sleep to see his mother in the soft glow of the night-light, sitting in a rocking chair beside his bed, ready for any emergency, always available.

A mother's availability in time of need reflects one of the great truths Israel learned from the altar of burnt offering. Its morning and evening offerings were arranged to provide a continuously burning sacrifice (Lev. 6:9-13). This sacrifice assured the Israelites that God's grace is constantly available any time, day or night. Thus, the first task of the returning exiles was to restore the services of the altar of burnt offering. As you study this week's lesson, remember that God is always available to you too.

FIRST THINGS FIRST (Ezra 3:1-6).

When the first migration of Jews from Babylon reached Judah, they scattered to their ancestral cities (Ezra 2:70). We can only imagine the problems they faced in establishing their claims to land and houses vacated by their ancestors 50 to 60 years earlier. The anger of the local people at this "invasion" of Israelites may be reflected in the statement made a month or two later when the people assembled at the site of the temple ruins: "Fear was upon them because of the people of those countries" (Ezra 3:3).

When did the people reassemble at Jerusalem? Ezra 3:1, 6. What was significant about this date? Lev. 23:24, 27, 34, 36.

"The 7th month (Tishri) was one of the most sacred months of the entire Jewish religious year. The 1st day of that month was New Year's Day of the civil calendar [Rosh Hashanah]. . . . The month began with a blowing of trumpets and a holy convocation (Lev. 23:24). . . . Ten days later came the solemn Day of Atonement (Lev. 23:27), followed almost immediately by the Feast of Tabernacles, from the 15th to the 22nd day of the same month (Lev. 23:34-36)." —*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, pp. 338, 339.

Even before the leaders made arrangements for rebuilding the temple, what did they construct and put into operation? Ezra 3:2, 3. Why did they not wait until the temple was completed before starting this aspect of the temple's ritual service?

There was always a sacrifice on the altar of burnt offering (Lev. 6:9-13), symbolically providing forgiveness through a Substitute to anyone who might seek the Lord. Even though it might take years to build the temple, the essential element of atonement by a Substitute and the assurance of God's forgiveness could be kept continuously before the people.

Your Sabbath School class decides to conduct a Revelation Seminar. Apply the principles of building an altar first. (For example, dedication and devotion are the only reasons to reach out; seek the assurance of the Holy Spirit's presence before you begin.)

BUILDING PREPARATIONS (Ezra 3:7-9).

With whom did Joshua and Zerubbabel contract to work on the temple? Ezra 3:7, first half.

Joshua and Zerubbabel contracted with the skilled builders among their own people, agreeing to pay them wages in money. Most likely, the Babylonians had employed these craftsmen to build their government and religious buildings.

With whom did the leaders contract for cedar? Ezra 3:7, last half.

The cedar of the Lebanon mountains attains a height of 80 feet (24 meters) and a girth of 40 feet (12 meters) at its full growth. Its fragrant wood was rot-resistant and knot-free, making it ideal for building purposes. The Phoenicians cut the trees in the mountains east of Sidon and transported the logs down the slopes to the Mediterranean Sea. Here workmen assembled the logs into rafts and floated them approximately 120 miles (192 kilometers) southward to Joppa (the modern Jaffa-Tel Aviv), Judah's port city 35 to 40 miles (56 to 64 kilometers) west of Jerusalem (see 2 Chron. 2:16). From Joppa, the Jews had an uphill task to move the logs inland to Jerusalem, which is approximately 2,500 feet (750 meters) above sea level at its highest point. It took seven months to collect the building materials needed for the temple (Ezra 3:1, 6, 8).

"The work was quickly begun, but it was not hurriedly and slovenly dispatched. Each part was wrought by those who were specially adapted for it. No amount of zeal in the cause of God will make up for lack of intelligence and adaptation. We must build up the spiritual house of the Lord—the Church of Christ—not only inspired by consecration of spirit, but guided by a wise and intelligent adoption of the best means and appliances."—Homily on Ezra 3:7-13, *Pulpit Commentary* (Chicago: Wilcox & Follett Co., n.d.), vol. 15, p. 40.

Consider the extensive plans and organization involved in the construction of the temple as a witness for Christ. How do your local church facilities reflect such principles?

CORNERSTONE CELEBRATION (Ezra 3:10-13).

For what great event did the leadership prepare a celebration? Ezra 3:10 (compare 1 Chron. 15:16).

Since Joshua followed "the ordinance of David" in this celebration, what psalm did the people probably sing? Ezra 3:11; 1 Chron. 16:7-36, especially note verse 34.

Note how Psalms 106 and 107 open with the same call to worship and praise. We are motivated to do so because of the Lord's mercy and goodness in redeeming us from our enemies (107:2). From what enemy has He redeemed you, and how has He done so?

"Through sin men have sold themselves to the adversary, but Heaven paid an infinite price to buy them back. . . . The redeemed, of all people, have most reason to say that God is good and that His mercy is everlasting. Far more than we do, we should relate what Christ has done for us, and our love for Him will deepen as we give expression to it."—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 873.

At this climax of their fondest dreams, how did the people respond? Ezra 3:11. How did the elderly react to this scene of national rejoicing? Ezra 3:12, 13.

If the older generation had formerly repented of their sins, Solomon's temple would not have been destroyed, nor would the exile have been necessary. Now, they had abundant evidence that God miraculously had restored them to their homeland and provided for the rebuilding process. It was nothing less than disdain for God to wail their opinion of the new temple so loudly that it drowned out the voices of praise.

"The murmuring and complaining, and the unfavorable comparisons made, had a depressing influence on the minds of many, and weakened the hands of the builders."—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 564.

In what way does your attitude about certain situations in your local church and the church at large impact upon others? How is your life testifying to others that Jesus is your Lord?

SAMARITAN CONFRONTATION (Ezra 4:1-5).

When God works, Satan counters. After the workers laid the cornerstone, Satan attempted to stall and make of no effect God's purpose in restoring Israel and the temple.

Who approached Zerubbabel, supposedly with the purpose of helping to rebuild the temple? Ezra 4:1, 2. From where had they originated? 2 Kings 17:24-41.

The deportation of whole nations within the Near East was Assyrian state policy. Three Assyrian rulers ordered the settlement of nationalities in the territory of the northern kingdoms of Israel: Sargon (2 Kings 17:24-29, 33); Esarhaddon (Ezra 4:2); and Ashurbanipal, "the great and noble Asnapper" (Ezra 4:10). A Levitical priest was ordered to teach these people about Jehovah (2 Kings 17:28). The result was a mixed worship of truth and error. Thus the Samaritan nation was a people of mixed nationality and mixed religion.

Not just a friendly offer. The return of God's people had, in effect, created a new province in an area abandoned for 50 years. Those who returned were thus subject to the control of the nearest local government such as that of the Samaritans. The offer to assist the Jews in rebuilding the temple possibly hid a motive to secure political control of the area now governed by the newly restored Israel.

After Zerubbabel declined their offer for help, how did the Samaritans show their true colors? Ezra 4:4, 5.

"Had the Jewish leaders accepted this offer of assistance, they would have opened a door for the entrance of idolatry. They discerned the insincerity of the Samaritans. They realized that help gained through an alliance with these men would be as nothing in comparison with the blessing they might expect to receive by following the plain commands of Jehovah."—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 568.

As Christians, to what extent can we enter into close commitments or alliances with those who do not share our faith? What are the dangers? (See 2 Cor. 6:14-18.)

PREVAILING PRAYER (Daniel 10).

In the third year of Cyrus (536/535 B.C.), how did Daniel react to the news of the Samaritan opposition? Dan. 10:2, 3.

"Daniel's period of mourning seems to have been contemporary with the serious threat that Cyrus' decree [to rebuild the temple] might not be carried to completion after all, because of the false reports sent by the Samaritans to the court of Persia, in an attempt to stop the building operations. The significant fact that during these three weeks the angel was struggling to influence Cyrus (vs. 12, 13) indicates that a vital decision of the king was at stake. While praying for further light . . . the prophet doubtless engaged in another period of intensive intercession . . . that the work of the adversary might be checked and that God's promises of restoration might be fulfilled to His chosen people."—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, pp. 857, 858.

What did Daniel learn while he was in vision? Dan. 10:13.

The Hebrew word for "prince" can refer either to Cyrus or to a supernatural evil personage attempting to control Cyrus, even as Michael (likewise a Prince) also sought to persuade him. The former urged the king to cancel his decree favoring the Jews, while Michael appealed through his conscience to confirm it. Two supernatural powers tried to influence Cyrus, but the choice was his to make. For 21 days the fate of Judah hung in the balance as Daniel—unaware of the supernatural wrestling—prayed for Israel's deliverance from Samaritan opposition.

What insight does this experience give us regarding the great controversy between Christ and Satan? Eph. 6:12.

What place does intercessory prayer have in your spiritual experience? Why are affirmative answers to such prayers often a long time in coming? What attitude should we adopt, and what should we do while waiting for answers?

FURTHER STUDY: The apostle Paul's experience makes clear that serious endeavors for the Lord often run into obstacles. How did Paul describe some of these obstacles in 2 Corinthians 11:23-27? What motivated Paul to continue despite the hardship? 1 Cor. 2:2.

Read the portions of "The Return of the Exiles" and "The Prophets of God Helping Them" in *Prophets and Kings* on pages 560-572.

God "permits us to encounter obstacles, persecution, and hardships, not as a curse, but as the greatest blessing of our lives. Every temptation resisted, every trial bravely borne, gives us a new experience and advances us in the work of character building. The soul that through divine power resists temptation reveals to the world and to the heavenly universe the efficiency of the grace of Christ."—*Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, p. 117.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Your church is planning evangelistic meetings. But a faction suddenly brings the board to vote that no money can be spent on evangelism until a new organ is purchased for the church. As personal-ministries director, should you (a) enter into intercessory prayer; (b) ask the board to allow you to present your case, and ask board members to reconsider their decision; (c) visit key board members and ask them to reconsider prayerfully; (d) other?
2. The altar of burnt offering teaches that God is always present. Can you think of instances when it would be helpful to remember this?
3. How can you make your devotional life more meaningful? How do you pray about circumstances that concern the church, as well as yourself? Do you think that, because God already knows everything, there is no need to pray?

SUMMARY: The first priority of the returned Jews was to build the altar with its constantly burning sacrifice; then followed the rebuilding of the temple. Just so, the Christian first establishes and maintains a union with Christ through daily prayer and Bible study. Then one can face life's varied challenges with confidence, knowing that the Lord is present to help.

A Second Attempt



Sabbath Afternoon

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Ezra 5, 6.

MEMORY TEXT: "Believe in the Lord your God, so shall ye be established; believe his prophets, so shall ye prosper" (2 Chronicles 20:20).

KEY QUESTIONS: What is the force that resides in the prophetic Word? Why does obedience to its direction result in a revival of faith and action despite opposition?

SECOND CHANCES. One day teenaged Shannon competed in the long jump at a track meet; the next day the junior high school student battled to stay alive. A victim of meningococemia, she was expected to die within hours after she was admitted to the hospital, but Shannon refused to give up. Although her left leg and right foot were amputated, Shannon survived. Today she plans to be a teacher. Her incredible will to live helped her get a second chance at life.

Like Shannon, the returned Jews faced an enormous, life-threatening obstacle. The local Samaritans vigorously sought to prevent their endeavors. During the next 15 years, Jewish hopes dimmed. And a usurper to the Persian throne ordered the builders to stop. Then prophetic voices began to sound. Israel was given a second chance.

As you study, ask yourself what prophetic voices say to us, and particularly to you, in 1993.

HELPING HANDS (Ezra 5:1, 2).

How did the Samaritans specifically prevent the Jews from reconstructing the temple in the period between Cyrus and Darius I, in the reign of Ahasuerus, and at one point during the later reign of Artaxerxes I? Ezra 4:1-23.

"It is generally held today that the incidents described in ch. 4 are not given in their chronological order; specifically, that the events of vs. 6-23 took place at a later time than those of vs. 1-5, 24. Accordingly, v. 24 and the narrative in ch. 5 about the work of Haggai and Zechariah, who were active in the 2d year of Darius I, are held to be a continuation of the order of events that was interrupted at ch. 4:5."—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, p. 347.

The Persian kings were as follows:

Ezra 4:1-5: Cyrus the Great (c. 553-530 B.C.), Cambyses (530-522 B.C.), False Smerdis (522 B.C), Darius I (522-486 B.C.).

Ezra 4:6: Xerxes (Ahasuerus; 486-465 B.C.).

Ezra 4:7-23: Artaxerxes I (465-423 B.C.).

Ezra 4:24 refers to verse 5, the second year of Darius I.

Who challenged the dispirited and apathetic Jews to resume work on the temple? Ezra 5:1. How had the Jews reacted to the Samaritan threat? Haggai 1:2-4. Read the message God gave to them in Haggai 1:5-13.

"Spiritually as well as temporally, the Israelites were in a pitiable state. So long had they murmured and doubted; so long had they chosen to make personal interests first, while viewing with apathy the Lord's temple in ruins, that many had lost sight of God's purpose in restoring them to Judea. . . . The lack of temporal prosperity was the result of a neglect to put God's interests first."—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 573.

Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the builders responded to God's message with eager willingness. According to the figures in Haggai 1:1 and 1:12-15, construction began anew 23 days after the prophet's appeal. Read also Ezra 5:1, 2.

How eagerly and quickly do you respond when the Lord calls you to action? Can you testify to the special blessings involved in following divine instruction? What personal interests are hindering us from putting God first?

OFFICIAL MISGIVINGS (Ezra 5:3-17).

On one side of the Behistun mountain that lies on the main route between Iran and Iraq, Darius I ordered a sculptured relief to be made of his conquest of the False Smerdis and nine other contenders for the Persian throne. Cut into the rock along with the figures (345 feet above ground level) is the account of his victories written in three different languages. With such a spirit of revolt in the air, it was only natural that Persian officials would check out news of vigorous building activities in Judah. And that is exactly what happened. Read Ezra 5:3, 4.

"On this side of the river" is better translated *beyond the river*. The river referred to is the Euphrates, while *Beyond the River* was the official name of that particular division of the Persian Empire composed of Syria and Palestine. Tatnai was governor of that region, and Shethar-boznai was most likely the royal secretary.

The King James Version suggests that the Persian delegation wanted the building stopped until they could know Darius' decision on the matter. But what kept the builders steadfastly pursuing their task? Ezra 5:5.

In the diplomatic manner of the elders, but especially in their steadfast determination to erect the temple, we see the striking influence of the prophetic witness of Haggai and Zechariah. God's direct and pointed message lifted the Jews above all fear of human authorities. They were toiling in response to the very instruction of the Almighty, "the God of heaven and earth" (verse 11), carrying out His specific directions. They refused to be intimidated.

Summarize the letter Tatnai sent to Darius I. Ezra 5:6-17. Notice especially what impressed him about the building project (verse 8). Also notice how the Jewish elders explained the reason for the destruction of the temple (verses 11, 12).

Is it good news or bad news that the "eye of God is upon me"? Why?

DARIUS' DECREE (Ezra 6:1-12).

What evidence does Ezra 6:1, 2 give that Darius I was willing to be fair with his Jewish subjects in Palestine?

The king could have ordered the Jews to stop their work when he could not find a record of Cyrus' decree in Babylon. Instead, he continued searching until he found the decree.

Contrast the decree that Darius found (Ezra 6:3-5) with the decree Cyrus published throughout the empire (Ezra 1:2-4). Why was it providential that Darius discovered the official decree?

The decree that Darius found was for official use only. It served as a directive to realm officials and stated that the royal treasury would pay to rebuild the temple. The decree that Cyrus *published* contained a permit to return to Judah, to rebuild the temple, and to collect money to assist with the rebuilding project. It stated nothing about the treasury paying for expenses.

Cyrus was the revered founder of the Persian Empire. Thus his decrees carried considerable weight with later Persian rulers. His statements regarding the size of the temple, its manner of building, and the plans for financing it would influence Darius I to reaffirm Cyrus' decree.

The Samaritans suppressed. In his response (Ezra 6:6-12), Darius placed accountability for building the temple on the "desk" of Tatnai. He authorized Tatnai to finance the building from Tatnai's tax funds. Darius also empowered Tatnai to sentence with capital punishment and confiscation of property any who dared interfere with the temple project. This action effectively stopped Samaritan hindrance to the temple's erection.

Darius expressed a measure of faith in the Jews' God by requesting that they pray for his life and the lives of his sons (Ezra 6:10). Why do you feel it was right for the Jews to do so? See 1 Timothy 2:1-4. What reasons do we have to pray for government officials?

THE TEMPLE IS FINISHED (Ezra 6:13-15).

How do these verses characterize the Jews' second attempt to rebuild the temple? Ezra 5:8; 6:12, 13.

The account of the Jews' second attempt to erect the temple is characterized by a Hebrew word that appears several times. The word highlights the scene with intense activity ("with diligence," NIV).

"When God opens the way for the accomplishment of a certain work, and gives assurance of success, the chosen instrumentality must do all in his power to bring about the promised result. In proportion to the enthusiasm and perseverance with which the work is carried forward, will be the success given."—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 263.

What specific promises given by God through Zechariah did the builders see fulfilled? Zech. 1:16; 4:6-10.

The Jews began their second attempt at building the temple on September 21, 520 B.C. (Haggai 1:14, 15) and completed the task on March 12, 515 B.C. (Ezra 6:15), a period of approximately 4 1/2 years. The previous temple had taken seven years to build (see 1 Kings 6:37, 38).

Thank-you notes. In Ezra 6:14, Ezra acknowledges that apart from God's providence nothing would have been accomplished. He also recognizes the agents through whom God worked: Cyrus, Darius I, and Artaxerxes I.

The mention of Artaxerxes indicates that Ezra probably wrote this account during the time of Artaxerxes (465-423 B.C.). Why would Ezra list Artaxerxes I when he came to the throne 50 years after the temple was completed? Since Artaxerxes was the third king "to beautify the house of the Lord" (Ezra 7:27) and to forward the work of restoring Jerusalem, it was fitting for Ezra to mention him.

People often begin projects for God with enthusiasm but become discouraged when obstacles arise. How does the story of Ezra and Nehemiah help with this problem? (1) It shows the effects of hard work and prayer. (2) It tells exactly how things should be done today. (3) It demonstrates how God accomplishes the impossible. (4) Other.

DEDICATION AND PASSOVER (Ezra 6:16-22).

In what spirit did the former exiles celebrate the dedication of the finished temple? What is the significance of the expressions, "the children of Israel," and "a sin offering for all Israel"? Ezra 6:16, 17.

Twenty-one years had elapsed since the returned exiles first began work on the temple. Now they realized with great joy that God had never abandoned them or His cause.

Ezra's emphasis on "Israel" testifies that the restored nation—with representatives from all 12 tribes—was the true spiritual descendant of the two Jewish kingdoms that had gone into Assyrian-Babylonian captivity.

Compare the sacrifices of this second dedication service with those offered at the consecration of Solomon's temple. Ezra 6:17; 1 Kings 8:63.

While the total number of offerings for the dedication of Zerubbabel's temple was considerably smaller, we still wonder how it was done and why. It should be noted that the bulk of the sacrifices at Solomon's dedication were "peace offerings" (see 1 Kings 8:63). Only the fat of these animals was burned; their flesh provided food for the festive meal—or meals—for the masses who attended the celebration. Thus the number attending may well have determined the number of peace offerings sacrificed.

Sharing the good news. A few weeks later the Israelites celebrated the Passover (Ezra 6:19). There is evidence that they were "evangelizing" in the fact that those who "had separated themselves . . . from the filthiness of the heathen of the land" ate the Passover with them (Ezra 6:21).

Do you see your faith as being strong enough to keep you through the 21 years it took Israel to rebuild the temple? If not, how can your faith be strengthened?

"When our prayers seem not to be answered, we are to cling to the promise; for the time of answering will surely come, and we shall receive the blessing we need most."
—*Steps to Christ*, p. 96.

What promises are you clinging to today?

FURTHER STUDY: Read Isaiah 1:1, 11-20 and Zechariah 7:1, 9, 10. What underlying principle is basic to prophetic messages, and how can you apply it to your life?

Read portions of "The Prophets of God Helping Them," "Joshua and the Angel," and "Not by Might nor by Power" in *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 573-597, and "Decision and Promptness" in *Gospel Workers*, pp. 133-135.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What can we learn about intercessory prayer from Ezra's experience?
2. In Thursday's lesson we learned that the Israelites' love for God attracted others to the faith. What does your attitude and behavior tell others about the God you profess to serve?

SUMMARY: Samaritans harassed the Jews into idleness. But the prophetic witness of Haggai and Zechariah led to a striking revival of faith, enabling the Jews to succeed. Responding to the appeals of God through Scripture and the prophetic gift of Ellen White will bring a revival to God's end-time people, enabling them to keep pace with His opening providences in preparing a people for Christ's return.

Make A Sad Story A Glad Story!

This is a story of four people: Everybody, Somebody, Anybody, and Nobody. There was an important job to be done, and Everybody was sure Somebody would do it.

Anybody could do it, but Nobody did it. Somebody got angry about that because it was Everybody's job. Anybody would have done it, but Nobody realized that Everybody wouldn't do it. It ended up that Everybody blamed Somebody when actually Nobody asked Anybody.

*The purpose of the
Thirteenth Sabbath Offering is to ask you!*

*Please remember the
Africa-Indian Ocean Division on December 18.*

(And thank you for your regular mission support each Sabbath.)

Living by the Word



Sabbath Afternoon

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Ezra 7, 8.

MEMORY TEXT: "Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments" (Ezra 7:10).

KEY QUESTIONS: Why is understanding Scripture so essential to a vibrant Christian experience? What efforts are you willing to make to obtain such an understanding?

REGAINING OUR HEALTH. More than 1,100 strangers responded to a New Year's Eve call and braved a winter storm to help save the life of Joanne, a 19-year-old victim of leukemia. The young woman required a donation of bone marrow compatible with hers. Nearly 40 relatives had tested negative, and now the family appealed to the public for help.

As bone marrow is essential for physical life, so is the Word of God essential for spiritual life (John 6:63). Joanne's chances of finding compatible marrow were only one in 20,000 in the general populace and one in 10,000 in her community of black persons. But for millions of people, the life-giving Scriptures are at their fingertips, and many ongoing programs make them available to previously unreached language groups. Vigorous spiritual health comes only as the Word of God is implanted in our hearts (James 1:21). This week we study how God's Word was implanted in Ezra's heart and in the hearts of his people.

BACK TO THE BIBLE (Ezra 7:1-6, 10).

Nearly 60 years elapsed between the completion of the temple under Zerubbabel and Joshua and the arrival of Ezra with a second migration of Jews from Babylon.

Although Ezra was a priest by descent and training, what was his special interest? Ezra 7:6.

The Hebrew word *torah* is translated "law." In Ezra and Nehemiah, the word *torah* appears 24 times. Torah refers to God's revealed will or any part of it. The term denotes God's "instructions" as given to His people in Scripture. Torah often designates the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible written by Moses. It also applies to all of Old Testament Scripture as Ezra assembled it.

Ezra's two desires: (1) He wanted to know, understand, and obey God's will (Ezra 7:10). (2) He also desired to know why Israel had gone into captivity (Ezra 9:7). With daily, patient study of the Scriptures, especially the Pentateuch, Ezra became "skilled in the law of Moses" (Ezra 7:6, RSV). As he "searched the historical and poetical books of the Bible . . . [he learned] why the Lord had permitted Jerusalem to be destroyed, and His people carried captive into a heathen land."—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 608.

To what important facts about themselves would Ezra's study and teaching have called the people's attention? Ezra 7:6, 10; Deut. 4:6-8 (compare Rom. 3:1, 2).

"It is the first and highest duty of every rational being to learn from the Scriptures what is truth, and then to walk in the light, and encourage others to follow his example. We should day by day study the Bible diligently, weighing every thought, and comparing scripture with scripture. With divine help, we are to form our opinions for ourselves, as we are to answer for ourselves before God."—*The Great Controversy*, p. 598.

According to the quotation above and Ezra 7:10, what three-pronged approach should you take as you study the Bible if you would truly know God's will for your life?

AUTHORITY FROM ARTAXERXES I (Ezra 7:11-26).

The Persian kings evidently had commissioners, drawn from the ranks of the subject nations, who functioned as advisers on the affairs of their respective peoples (see Neh. 11:24). Studies have shown that Ezra's title, "a scribe of the law of the God of heaven" (Ezra 7:12), indicates he was a commissioner in charge of Jewish affairs. Such an appointment gave him a great deal of influence in the court and brought him in contact with Artaxerxes the king. (See *SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 366.)

What wide-sweeping permission did Artaxerxes I give the Jews at this time? Ezra 7:13, 14.

The Lord made it evident that He wanted His people to resettle in their homeland. Just as His servant Daniel influenced Cyrus, now Ezra appealed to Artaxerxes.

Who else beside the king wanted Ezra to organize the province of Judah? Ezra 7:14. How did Artaxerxes ask Ezra to organize the province? Ezra 7:25, 26.

The fact that the king's seven counselors endorsed Judah as a functioning national entity in the Persian Empire suggests certain political motives. A few years earlier Egypt revolted from Persian domination. In 456 B.C. (the year after Ezra's return) Megabyzos, Artaxerxes' brother-in-law, entered Egypt at the head of a Persian army and in a successful two-year campaign restored Persian authority. The establishment of Judah in 457 B.C. as a viable, subject nation would give Persian forces a loyal Palestinian base from which to launch their military excursions into Egypt.

"In the word of God the curtain is drawn aside, and we behold, behind, above, and through all the play and counterplay of human interests and power and passions, the agencies of the all-merciful One, silently, patiently working out the counsels of His own will."—*Education*, p. 173.

What in this lesson encourages you to believe that God is always active to accomplish His purpose in your life and in your church?

A TIME FOR THANKSGIVING (Ezra 7:27, 28).

Ezra 7:6, 28 suggests that Ezra appeared in person before the king to request the provisions embodied in the written decree. What enabled this humble man to exercise such holy boldness? Compare Romans 10:17.

Ezra studied the Scriptures diligently in order to know God's will. Thus he developed both a steadfast faith in God and courage to use his position to benefit God's people. Holy boldness springs from intimate communion with the heavenly King of kings.

"The weak man may become strong, the timid may become brave, and the irresolute and undecided may become men of quick and firm decision, when they feel that God considers them of sufficient consequence to accept their labors."—*Testimonies*, vol. 4, p. 614.

Summarize Ezra's reaction to the generosity of the Persian court. Notice to whom Ezra gives the credit. Ezra 7:27, 28 (compare Proverbs 21:1).

There is no self-glorifying on Ezra's part. He freely acknowledges that it was God who prompted the Persians, and that it was God's grace that enabled him to make a persuasive presentation.

How sensitive are you to the evidences of God's overruling providences in your personal affairs? in the church? in the world? Is the attitude of praise and thanksgiving a normal part of your life? Why or why not?

"Difficulties will arise that will try your faith and patience. Face them bravely. Look on the bright side. If the work is hindered, be sure that it is not your fault, and then go forward, rejoicing in the Lord. Heaven is full of joy. It resounds with the praises of Him who made so wonderful a sacrifice for the redemption of the human race. Should not the church on earth be full of praise? Should not Christians publish throughout the world the joy of serving Christ? Those who in heaven join with the angelic choir in their anthem of praise must learn on earth the song of heaven, the keynote of which is thanksgiving."—*Testimonies*, vol. 7, p. 244.

EXODUS UNDER EZRA (Ezra 8:1-30).

Nearly 150 years had elapsed since the first captives had been taken to Babylon. And it was now 80 years since Zerubbabel had led the initial migration back home.

Ezra addressed his appeal to return to Judah to the "chief" men, the heads of family groups. If they agreed to leave Babylon, they would have an important influence in urging "clan" members to return also.

At the staging area, Ezra discovered that no one from the tribe of Levi had decided to return. How did he remedy the situation? Ezra 8:15-20.

Levitical families would be reluctant to leave their established homes and gainful employment in Babylon, because unlike those of other tribes, they had no hereditary lands awaiting them in Palestine. The Levites were dependent on Israel's tithe (Num. 18:20, 21). Thus, the return to Palestine meant they would have to exchange their economic security for the seeming uncertainties of a tithing system that varied with the spiritual and material condition of Judah. But the Levites were the centerpiece in Ezra's plan to instruct the people in the statutes and judgments of the law of God.

God's protection, not man's. Next, Ezra led the people in a season of fasting and prayer, asking that God would honor their trust in Him and bring them safely through the perils of the journey (Ezra 8:21-23). Ezra had spoken so openly of the true God before the king that he was embarrassed to ask for military protection along the way.

Describe Ezra's plan for the transportation of the gold, silver, and costly vessels. Why was this a good plan? Ezra 8:24-29.

Although Ezra led the people in several days of fasting and prayer, it is evident that he also made careful plans to assure success. If we commit our lives to Christ, why is it necessary to make plans? Why is it not a lack of faith to exercise prudent thought and set goals for life's journey? How can you balance your human plans with total trust in God's control and guidance of your affairs?

HOME AT LAST (Ezra 7:7-9; 8:31-36).

In what year of the reign of Artaxerxes I did Ezra's group arrive in Jerusalem? Ezra 7:7.

Because Ezra and Nehemiah appeared as one book in Hebrew manuscripts until A.D. 1448, we may presume that a similar dating system undergirds both. Evidence from Nehemiah 1:1; 2:1, and archeological findings from a fifth-century-B.C. Jewish garrison in southern Egypt indicate that the Jews at the time of Ezra were using an autumn-to-autumn calendar. Thus, Ezra's migration began and ended in 457 B.C., the seventh year of Artaxerxes' reign according to Jewish reckoning. Since it would have taken some time to put into operation the king's directives, the decree that fully restored Judah as a nation would not have become effective before the autumn of 457 B.C.

Why was 457 B.C. a crucial year for God's people? Dan. 9:25.

According to Daniel 9:25 the Messiah would appear 69 prophetic weeks after "the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem." A day in prophetic time is equivalent to a literal year (Num. 14:34; Eze. 4:6). Therefore, 69 weeks x 7 days per week = 483 days/years. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah list four "decrees": (1) 537 B.C., to rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:1-4); (2) 519 B.C., to reactivate the first decree to rebuild the temple (Ezra 6:1-12); (3) 457 B.C., to restore the autonomy of the Jewish nation under Persian lordship (Ezra 7:11-26; this is one of the most significant dates in human history); (4) 444 B.C., to restore recently burned gates and partially destroyed walls of Jerusalem (Neh. 2:3-5; 6:15).

Since the third decree is the only one that truly restored Judah as a functioning state, it is reasonable to begin Daniel's prophecy with the time when that decree became effective—the autumn of 457 B.C. (Compare Ezra 6:14.) On this basis of reckoning the Messiah would appear in the fall of A.D. 27, the year in which Jesus was baptized. (See Luke 3:1, 2, 21.)

Why do you think God told His Old Testament church when the Messiah would come? Why is He not as specific regarding the Second Coming?

FURTHER STUDY: Read Daniel 8:13, 14; 9:21-26.

The year 457 B.C. is critical to us, as well, because it is the starting point of the 2300-day prophecy of Daniel 8:14. In Daniel 9:24, the angel "tells Daniel that 490 years [remember the year-day principle] were to be cut off from the longer period of 2300 years. As the starting point for the 490 years, Gabriel points to 'the going forth of the command to restore and build Jerusalem' (Dan. 9:25), which took place in 457 B.C. . . .

"The 490 years ended in A.D. 34 [when Stephen was stoned]. When we cut off 490 years from the 2300 years, we are left with 1810 years. Since the 2300 years were to extend 1810 years beyond A.D. 34, they reach to the year 1844.

"In 1844, Christ came to the Ancient of Days and began the final phase of His high-priestly ministry in the heavenly sanctuary. This ministry was the antitype of the Day of Atonement cleansing of the sanctuary that Daniel 7 depicts as the pre-Advent investigative judgment."—*Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, p. 324.

Read "Ezra, the Priest and Scribe" in *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 607-617; *SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, pp. 100-109, 326, 327; vol. 2, pp. 110, 116; *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, pp. 312-327.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Does the thought of an investigative judgment cause you to be fearful or joyful? Why? Might some fear be essential to growth in sanctification?
2. What assurance do we find in the process of the investigative judgment? 1 John 2:1.
3. Upon what does the investigative judgment encourage us to depend? Matt. 22:11-14; 2 Cor. 12:9; Rev. 3:5.
4. List two reasons for the investigative judgment.

SUMMARY: The driving force of Ezra's migration was a back-to-the-Bible movement. A similar earnest searching of the Scriptures will result in spiritual strength for believers today, inspiring them to daring exploits of witnessing.

Mixed Marriages



Sabbath Afternoon

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Ezra 9, 10.

MEMORY TEXT: "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?" (2 Corinthians 6:14).

KEY QUESTION: Why are religiously mixed marriages quite often a detriment to spiritual development?

"WHAT ARE YOUR CHANCES?" The series' title was an attention-getter for college students: "Love, Courtship, and Marriage"! All eyes were fixed on the speaker and the young couple. "Marilyn," the speaker said, "I want you to stand up here with me and face the audience. You represent a Christian. Ned, you stand one step lower facing Marilyn and take her hand. You represent a non-Christian suitor.

"You want to marry, but you do not have the same spiritual values. Marilyn, what are your chances of bringing Ned to where you stand?" Marilyn seized Ned's hand with both of hers and pulled, but the husky Ned didn't budge. "Ned, try to bring Marilyn to you." With one quick yank, Marilyn tumbled down. Few missed the point: In a mixed marriage, it is easier for the believer to compromise faith than to lift the unbelieving spouse to a higher spiritual level. Mixed marriages were one of the great issues that faced Ezra.

PROBLEM AND PRAYER (Ezra 9:1-15).

Like yeast in bread dough, Ezra's spiritual influence began to penetrate the earlier settlers. Once in their homeland, Ezra was able to arouse some consciences in less than five months.

What problem was thus presented to Ezra? Why was it so serious an issue? Ezra 9:1, 2 (compare Deut. 7:6).

No one is authorized to mount the judgment seat to criticize persons in religiously mixed marriages. Not all mixed marriages have harmed godly believers. Nevertheless, it is often true that a religiously mixed marriage leads the believer to compromise his or her faith. The possibility was that Jewish intermarriage with pagans would lead to the extinction of the true religion. Since even the priests and Levites were involved in this trend, the practice would eventually become widespread.

Last week we learned that Ezra was an earnest student of Scripture. Surely he must have known about the counsel God gave to Israel after He led them out of Egypt. He also must have known that the problem of believers marrying unbelievers was one reason for the Flood. (See Gen. 6:1, 2, 4, 5; Ex. 34:14-16; Deut. 7:1-4; Joshua 23:11-13.)

How did Ezra react after becoming aware of the problem? Ezra 9:3-15.

"In his study of the causes leading to the Babylonian captivity, Ezra had learned that Israel's apostasy was largely traceable to their mingling with heathen nations. He had seen that if they had obeyed God's command to keep separate from the nations surrounding them, they would have been spared many sad and humiliating experiences. Now when he learned that notwithstanding the lessons of the past, men of prominence had dared transgress the laws given as a safeguard against apostasy, his heart was stirred within him."
—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 620.

Why does the counsel against believers marrying unbelievers still apply to Christians today? How should we communicate concern to those about to enter a mixed marriage? How should we relate to the couple after the marriage has been entered into? Why?

SEVERING MIXED TIES (Ezra 10).

As the priests and Levites, along with the men, women, and children, witnessed Ezra's anguish over their mixed marriages, they themselves burst into tears. In his prayer, Ezra proposed no solution; he feared there was none.

What solution did Shechaniah propose? Ezra 10:2-4.

The remedy to divorce their foreign wives and put them and their children away came from one of the leading men and was sworn to, and thus endorsed, by both the leadership and the people (Ezra 10:5). This tragic solution, resulting as it did in great trauma for the families involved, was evidently felt to be the lesser of two evils. We may assume that the plan involved the return of the wives and children to their parental homes beyond the borders of Judah.

An urgent proclamation. Ezra 10:7 tells us that a proclamation then went throughout the entire land, calling for "all the children of the captivity" to meet in Jerusalem. Any who would not come would be separated from the congregation and his property appropriated to the sacred use of the temple (Ezra 10:8).

Summarize the appeal Ezra made to the people, and their response. Ezra 10:10-14.

Although Ezra had not proposed the solution, he evidently endorsed it. He plainly laid before the national assembly the nature of their trespass and called on them to respond in harmony with the solution covenanted a few days earlier by the leaders and congregation at Jerusalem.

The ninth month in the Jewish calendar is the time of heavy winter rains. The weather, plus the extent of the problem, contributed to the decision that those involved should appear before suitable panels of elders and judges in each city to have their cases reviewed and settled.

Although God freely forgives, why is it so difficult to retrace our steps once we've sinned? Remember, it is better to heed the fence at the top of the cliff than to have an ambulance waiting for us at the foot.

DANGERS OF A PERSISTENT BAD PRACTICE (Neh. 13:23-29).

Thirteen years after the first recorded instance of mixed marriages, Nehemiah, as governor, faced it again. Nehemiah served two terms as governor of Judah. After the initial stint of 12 years (Neh. 5:14), he returned to the court of Artaxerxes (13:6), probably for several years. When he returned to Judah, he was once again confronted with the problem of mixed marriages (13:23, 24). Now he perceived a new danger, "namely the corruption of the next generation. The babble of languages among the children (13:24) was not only a symptom but a threat: it meant a steady erosion of Israelite identity at the level of all thinking and expression, and a loss of access to the Word of God."—Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, p. 131.

What did the people vow during a service in which they renewed their covenant loyalty to God? Neh. 10:29, 30.

The renewal of Israel's commitment to God and the subsequent years under Nehemiah's governorship (Neh. 5:14) were high points in the nation's post-exilic experience.

"Every true turning to the Lord brings abiding joy into the life. . . . It is God's glory to encircle sinful, repentant human beings in the arms of His love, to bind up their wounds, to cleanse them from sin, and to clothe them with the garments of salvation."—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 668.

In his appeal to the people, Nehemiah referred to Solomon (Neh. 13:26). How did this king, despite his wisdom, eventually apostatize? 1 Kings 3:1; 11:1-8.

"Solomon flattered himself that his wisdom and the power of his example would lead his wives from idolatry to the worship of the true God, and also that the alliances thus formed would draw the nations round about into close touch with Israel."—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 54.

Why does the influence of evil seem to exert itself in a stronger, more effective manner than does the influence of good?

INTERMARRIAGE AND INTRIGUE (Neh. 6:17, 18; 13:4-9, 28).

How did Tobiah the Ammonite and Sanballat the Horonite secure influence over the affairs of Judah? Neh. 13:4, 5 (compare 6:17, 18; 13:28).

It is generally recognized that Eliashib, the high priest, was "allied" or "connected" to Tobiah, probably through the marriages of Tobiah and his son with two prominent families in Judah (Neh. 6:17-19). The high priest was also linked with Sanballat through the marriage of his grandson with Sanballat's daughter (Neh. 13:4, 28). Marriage with the enemy influenced Eliashib the high priest and other leading families to betray their nation. The high priest even allowed Tobiah to live in the temple complex while Nehemiah was back at the Persian court (Neh. 13:4-7).

What vigorous action did Nehemiah take against these mixed marriages, especially those at the priestly level? Neh. 13:8, 9, 28-30.

"A grandson of the high priest, having married a daughter of the notorious Sanballat, was not only removed from office, but promptly banished from Israel. . . .

"Many who had married idolaters chose to go with them into exile; and these, with those who had been expelled from the congregation, joined the Samaritans. Hither some who had occupied high positions in the work of God found their way, and after a time cast in their lot fully with them. Desiring to strengthen this alliance, the Samaritans promised to adopt more fully the Jewish faith and customs; and the apostates, determined to outdo their former brethren, erected a temple on Mount Gerizim, in opposition to the house of God at Jerusalem. Their religion continued to be a mixture of Judaism and heathenism; and their claim to be the people of God was the source of schism, emulation, and enmity between the two nations, from generation to generation."—*Prophets and Kings*, pp. 674, 675.

How could Israel separate herself from strangers, yet still attract others to God? What implications does your answer have for the Seventh-day Adventist Church today?

DIVORCE FOR THE WRONG REASONS (Mal. 2:11, 14-16).

God also directed Malachi to speak to the issue of mixed marriages. How did divorce figure into the matter? How did the Lord regard such divorces? Mal. 2:11, 14-16.

The “daughter of a strange [or foreign] god” (Mal. 2:11) was an idolatress who served a foreign deity just as the Israelites were sons of Yahweh because they served the true God (Deut. 14:1, RSV). Malachi speaks about God’s hatred of divorce in the context of both leaders and people divorcing their Jewish spouses so they could marry pagan women.

What New Testament principle continues to advise Christians against mixed marital unions? 2 Cor. 6:14-16.

What counsels regarding marriage did the apostles Paul and Peter give to persons who became Christians? 1 Cor. 7:12-16; 1 Peter 3:1.

Why did Ezra and Nehemiah insist on dissolving the mixed marriages in Judah, while Paul and Peter encouraged new Christians to keep their nonbelieving spouses? In the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, national existence was at stake—not so in Christian times. Paul and Peter gave their counsel when the church was young and growing rapidly. Thus it often occurred that a husband or wife would become a Christian, but his or her spouse would choose to continue with the belief they both held at the time of their marriage. The apostles advised that in such cases it would not be right for the Christian spouse to divorce the nonbelieving spouse. This counsel indicates God’s will today for those who find themselves in a spiritually divided home. God will guide a believer in adopting winning ways toward the nonbelieving spouse. While no one is required to submit to abusive behavior from a spouse, a believer is encouraged to stay with the nonbelieving spouse because there is always the possibility that the believer’s witness will attract the nonbeliever to Christ.

Neither Beth nor Jim was a Christian when they married. Recently Beth became a Seventh-day Adventist, and she wonders how she should regard Jim. How would you advise her?

FURTHER STUDY: How does Genesis 24:1-4 assist in your understanding of this week's lesson? Why was it so important for Isaac to have a spouse of like religious faith?

Read also "A Spiritual Revival" in *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 618-627; "Unscriptural Marriages" in *Testimonies*, vol. 4, pp. 503-508; "Marriage With Unbelievers" in *Testimonies*, vol. 5, pp. 361-368.

"Since marriage itself is by divine plan, it follows that one's attitude toward marriage may be colored by his attitude toward God. Where neither party of a marriage reveres God, neither may honor highly his marriage vow.

"If one party is a Christian and the other is not, there may be serious trouble. The non-Christian may be jealous that his mate has given God first place. He may desire to do things or to go to places that the Christian cannot conscientiously go. Such things as religious offerings, church attendance, family worship, may cause deep friction in a divided home."—Raymond H. Woolsey, *Planning the Ideal Home* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1975), p. 30.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Malachi 2:11, 14-16 speaks about divorce on two levels: a believer's "divorce" from God (apostasy) and divorce in human marriage. When is equating apostasy with divorce an appropriate comparison? (Compare 1 Cor. 7:10, 11.)
2. In biblical times there were only two classes: Israelites and non-Israelites. But today, apart from the large number of non-Christians, there is a great variety of Christian denominations. Is it wise for a Christian from one denomination to marry someone from another denomination? Why?
3. After studying this week's lesson, how would you answer the Key Question on page 41?

SUMMARY: The strength of society and the church lies in the strength of homes. Mixed marriages have never been God's ideal. The practice threatened the existence of Judah in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. We are always counseled against forming such marriages. But we should do everything possible to hold an established home together and to bring the nonbelieving spouse into the true Christian faith.

A Patriot's Vision



Sabbath Afternoon

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Neh. 1:1-2:18.

MEMORY TEXT: "Neither told I any man what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem" (Nehemiah 2:12).

KEY QUESTIONS: Why is it essential for a leader to be a person of vision? How does a leader in God's cause learn to understand God's will for leaders and those who follow?

VISION DRIVEN. Will Steger, age 45, had a dream. He and Jean-Louis Etienne formed a team that would tramp across Antarctica. Initially pinned down by a 60-day storm with 100 mph (160 kph) winds and -45° (F) temperatures, their five-member group gradually ticked off the sections of the 4,000-mile (6,400 kilometer) trek. On February 20, 1990, the men with their three sleds and 40 dogs began the last leg of their great crossing. Their desire to call people's attention to the environmental fragility of the Antarctic and the need for global cooperation to protect it had lifted them above the intense hardship they had endured for 6 1/2 months.

Like Steger, all good leaders are visionaries. They see a need, form a purpose, and inspire others to help fulfill the vision. Nehemiah was a Hebrew patriot with a vision. He envisioned delivering God's people from their enemies and bringing about spiritual renewal. As you study this week, ask yourself, *What vision for the church has God put in my heart?*

BROKEN WALLS—BURNED GATES (Neh. 1:1-3).

The book of Nehemiah opens with Nehemiah living in Shushan, the winter capital of the Persian Empire (Neh. 1:1). Shushan lay 100 miles (160 kilometers) north of the Persian Gulf and is the setting for the prophecy of Daniel 8:2 (compare Esther 1:2). As the king's cupbearer, Nehemiah was in close contact with King Artaxerxes (Neh. 1:11, last part).

What news about conditions in Jerusalem and the nation did Hanani bring to Nehemiah? Neh. 1:2, 3.

The Hebrew words for "father," "son," and "brother" designate distant relatives, as well as immediate kinship. Hanani may have been a more distant relative, but it is possible that he was Nehemiah's blood brother (compare Neh. 7:2).

Summarize the evidence that Hanani's report referred, not to the devastation rendered by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C., but to recent destruction. Ezra 4:7, 11-23.

The Jews completed the temple under Zerubbabel in 515 B.C., the sixth year of Darius I (Ezra 6:15). Nearly 60 years elapsed before Ezra arrived in the late summer of 457 B.C. with a decree from Artaxerxes I directing him to organize the nation along the lines of the Mosaic code (Ezra 7:14, 24-26). Twelve years later, probably in December 445 B.C., Nehemiah received news about conditions in the city. During at least a portion of those 12 years Ezra and his associates started to rebuild the walls and gates of Jerusalem (Ezra 4:7, 12, 13, 16).

Hanani's report to Nehemiah most likely refers to Ezra 4:7-23, "in which a bid to rebuild the walls had been reported to King Artaxerxes and promptly crushed 'by force and power.' It was an ominous development, for the ring of hostile neighbours round Jerusalem could now claim royal backing."—Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, p. 78.

Was Hanani talebearing by reporting bad news? To whom and how do you report bad news you hear about your denomination and local church? What are your motives for repeating it? How should we react when we read and hear reports of spiritual decline and backward steps in the church?

A PATRIOT PRAYS—A VISION IS BORN (Neh. 1:4-11).

Briefly review yesterday's lesson. We might well ask the question, Why would Artaxerxes suddenly reverse his goodwill toward Ezra and favor the Samaritans (Ezra 4:21-23)? The political situation in the Persian Empire helps to answer this question. Mega Byzus, Artaxerxes' brother-in-law, reconquered Egypt in a campaign that lasted from 456 to 454 B.C. Mega Byzus also ruled over the large territory lying between the Euphrates and Egypt. This territory included Judah. When Artaxerxes ordered the execution of Inarus, the Egyptian ruler who surrendered to Mega Byzus on the latter's promise that his life would be spared, Mega Byzus led a revolt against Artaxerxes. This revolt occurred about 450 B.C. Mega Byzus defeated the two armies Artaxerxes sent, making the revolt an even greater threat to the Medo-Persia Kingdom. It is probably during the time of this revolt that the Samaritans and Artaxerxes dealt directly with each other, bypassing the higher levels of administration to embarrass Mega Byzus at the expense of the Jews.

Describe Nehemiah's reaction to Hanani's news. Neh. 1:4. Study his prayer according to the following:

The substance of his prayer (Neh. 1:6, 7)

The promise he claimed (verses 8, 9)

The plan he was formulating for which he desired God's blessing (verse 11)

Answered prayer. As Nehemiah prayed over the next few months, a vision began to grow within him. Maybe the Lord could use him to answer his own prayer. Later he was to say that God had put the answer to his prayer in his heart (Neh. 2:12).

Can you share a time when God used you to answer your own prayers? How did this strengthen your relationship with Him? What does Nehemiah's prayer teach us about the principles of active prayer?

A DIPLOMATIC APPEAL (Neh. 2:1-6).

How long did Nehemiah pray and plan before he actually approached the king about his concern for Jerusalem? Compare Neh. 1:1 with 2:1.

Nehemiah heard the bad news about Jerusalem in the month of Chisleu, the ninth month of the Jewish religious year. Chisleu began at the new moon of November or December. But he did not mention his concern to Artaxerxes until the month of Nisan, the first month of the Jewish religious year, which began with the new moon of March or April. For four months Nehemiah prayed, planned, and waited for a favorable opportunity.

Describe the circumstances under which Nehemiah informed the king of his anguish over Jerusalem's condition. Neh. 2:1. How did Nehemiah explain the reason for his sadness? Neh. 2:2, 3.

"Nehemiah, like Esther, had the wisdom to present the matter first as news of a personal blow, not as a political issue. At whatever stage in the conversation the *city, the place of my fathers' sepulchres*, was revealed to be Jerusalem, the king's sympathy had been already enlisted, and his readiness to help already made clear."—Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, p. 80.

The next step. Nehemiah 2:4 brings us to the critical point of the scene. Tension mounts as Artaxerxes asks Nehemiah, "What is it you want?" (NIV). We expect an immediate answer, but Nehemiah keeps us waiting as he pauses to offer a quick prayer. Finally he answers, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it" (verse 5, NIV). Verse 6 records the king's answer. At last, the king's answer enables a vision to become reality.

Spontaneous moments of prayer can result from impulsiveness or from a continual habit of turning to God. Which is the better motivation? Why? What does it mean to you to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17)?

PRUDENT PLANNING (Neh. 2:7-9).

Because the biblical accounts are so action-packed, we tend to think of Nehemiah as a person of vigorous action and little thought. Nehemiah 2:7-9 tells us differently.

What evidence do we have that during his months of praying Nehemiah also laid careful plans? Neh. 2:6-8.

A lesson to all Christians. "This example of wise forethought and resolute action should be a lesson to all Christians. God's children are not only to pray in faith, but to work with diligent and provident care. They encounter many difficulties, and often hinder the working of Providence in their behalf, because they regard prudence and painstaking effort as having little to do with religion. . . . Careful consideration and well-matured plans are as essential to the carrying forward of sacred enterprises today as in the time of the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls."—*Prophets and Kings*, pp. 633, 634.

Nehemiah took a big chance when he, the king's cupbearer, asked the king whether he could leave his employ. His success could have made him self-centered and proud. But to whom did Nehemiah credit his success? Neh. 2:8.

What value is there in visiting in the community to report on God's work and to invite others to assist? How do you think Nehemiah would regard Ingathering?

"Some may question the propriety of receiving gifts from unbelievers. Let such ask themselves: 'Who is the real owner of our world? . . .' God has an abundance in our world, and He has placed His goods in the hands of all, both the obedient and the disobedient. He is ready to move upon the hearts of worldly men, even idolaters, to give of their abundance for the support of His work; and He will do this as soon as His people learn to approach these men wisely and to call their attention to that which it is their privilege to do."—*Southern Watchman*, March 15, 1904. [Quotations from *Southern Watchman* are reprinted in a booklet titled *Lessons From the Life of Nehemiah*, available from the E. G. White Estate at the General Conference for \$1.50.]

WILLING COOPERATION (Neh. 2:9-18).

Once in Jerusalem, Nehemiah worked swiftly. On the third night after his arrival, he and a few select persons toured the devastated areas (Neh. 2:11-16). After his tour, he could better plan just how to execute the needed repairs as quickly as possible.

"Mounted on his mule, he moved about by moonlight surveying the ruined walls and broken gates of the city of his fathers. . . . Memories of Israel's past glory stood out in sharp contrast with the evidence of her present degradation."

"With sorrow-stricken heart, the visitor from afar gazed upon the ruined defenses of his loved Jerusalem. And is it not thus that angels of heaven survey the condition of the church of Christ? Like the dwellers at Jerusalem, we become accustomed to existing evils, and often are content while making no effort to remedy them. But how are these evils regarded by beings divinely illuminated? Do not they, like Nehemiah, look with sorrow-burdened heart upon ruined walls, and gates burned with fire?"—*Southern Watchman*, March 22, 1904.

How tactfully did Nehemiah motivate the leaders and people to respond to the opportunity God had given them to restore the nation? Neh. 2:17, 18.

Although a newcomer, Nehemiah identified with the people: "The distress that *we* are in" (Neh. 2:17, italics supplied). That "distress" was not the city's insecurity, but the disgrace that rested on both God and His people (verse 17). He suggested that they renew the building program. But before they could object, Nehemiah went on to explain how God had opened a door of opportunity and that Artaxerxes had authorized him to restore the city's walls and gates. The announcement stirred the people into action.

"The holy energy and high hope of Nehemiah were communicated to the people. As they caught the spirit, they rose for a time to the moral level of their leader. Each, in his own sphere, was a sort of Nehemiah; and each strengthened and upheld his brother in the work."—*Southern Watchman*, March 29, 1904.

What principles for witnessing can we learn from Nehemiah's experience?

FURTHER STUDY: Nehemiah's faith and courage grew as he continued to pray. How might prayer have benefited the people we read about in the following passages? Mark 14:32-41, 66-72; Gen. 12:11-20.

Read "A Man of Opportunity" and "The Builders on the Wall" in *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 628-638.

"There is need of Nehemiahs in the church today—not men who can pray and preach only, but men whose prayers and sermons are braced with firm and eager purpose. The course pursued by this Hebrew patriot in the accomplishment of his plans is one that should still be adopted by ministers and leading men. When they have laid their plans, they should present them to the church in such a manner as to win their interest and co-operation. Let the people understand the plans and share in the work, and they will have a personal interest in its prosperity. . . . The spirit manifested by the leader will be, to a great extent, reflected by the people."—*Southern Watchman*, March 29, 1904.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What in this lesson should encourage us to believe that God can change people's hearts and lead them to do His bidding?
2. What is the relationship between prayer and action that God would have us see in this lesson?
3. After this week's lesson, how would you answer the questions in Sabbath's Key Question?

SUMMARY: Write your own summary by answering the Key Questions on page 48. Be sure to mention the role of prayer regarding the process of turning visions into reality.

Building in Faith



Sabbath Afternoon

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Nehemiah 3, 4, 6.

MEMORY TEXT: "I sent messengers to them with this reply: 'I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?'" (Nehemiah 6:3, NIV).

KEY QUESTIONS: Why is it that, when working for God, we often face opposition? How should we react to opposition if our course is correct?

A SENSE OF DIRECTION. Teenager Tonia Valleta lives by dreams and goals. These provide direction to her developing abilities. Tonia lost both her eyes to cancer at the age of two. But this tragedy has not suppressed her spirit. The sports-minded youngster presently holds six national swimming records for blind persons; she was a member of two relay teams that set world records.

"The biggest problem I've had," Tonia says, "has been learning to swim straight. I had to develop a sense of direction."—*Washington Post*, January 25, 1990.

In effect, Tonia churns through the water by faith, not by sight. It is the goal she sees in her mind that drives her down the swimming lanes to success.

The people of Judah caught the vision of a restored Jerusalem. By faith they saw what the city would become. As you study this lesson, ask yourself, *What vision does faith help me to see?*

BUILDERS ON THE WALL (Nehemiah 3).

Since part of ancient Jerusalem lies beneath the present city, it is impossible to determine the exact location of its walls in Nehemiah's time. Their length is variously estimated to have been from two to three miles (3.2 to 4.8 kilometers; see *SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 408; *Prophets and Kings*, p. 639). No information is given about their height. For an example of the teamwork it took to rebuild the walls, read Nehemiah 3:6-8. The entire chapter reads much the same way.

Concerted effort. Nehemiah 3 contains an intriguing list of names and places that reveal a highly organized effort engaged in by people from all areas of life. Merchants (verses 31, 32), craftsmen (verse 8), family units (verse 12), temple servants (verse 26), and others, all combined their strength to finish the task.

Such organization is an outline for successful church growth. (Compare Luke 9:13, 14; 10:20.) People of all talents organized into groups, and each group performed a specific work. Team effort brought the building project to a successful completion.

Which group led the way? Neh. 3:1. Why was it important for this group to show such leadership?

Which group willingly repaired two sections of the wall? Neh. 3:5, 27. What indicates that resistance to Nehemiah's leadership was beginning to grow?

"In every religious movement there are some who, while they cannot deny that the cause is God's, still hold themselves aloof. . . . It is well for such ones to remember the record kept on high—that book in which . . . every neglected opportunity to do service for God is recorded; and there, too, every deed of faith and love is held in everlasting remembrance."—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 639.

When calls are made in your church for cooperative effort, do you respond as willingly as the Tekoites, or do you hang back like their nobles? How can you tap the source of Nehemiah's enthusiasm?

FACING CONTEMPT AND RIDICULE (Neh. 4:1-6).

How did Israel's enemies react to the rebuilding of the walls? Neh. 2:9, 10, 19; 4:1-3.

Archeological discoveries have clarified the positions and influence of Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem. Sanballat was the governor of Samaria. Tobiah was an Ammonite official, of noble family and possibly of half-Jewish descent. Geshem was the king of Qedar in Arabia, controlling also at that time the territories of Moab, Edom, and the approaches to Egypt. Although subject to the Persian Empire, Judah was encircled on the north, east, and south by people hostile to her existence, people who could resort to a "war of nerves" even though they could not openly violate Artaxerxes' authorization to Nehemiah.

A feeble attempt. Sanballat's mockery of God's people in the presence of his troops might have frightened a lesser leader. In reality, this rage was only a cover. Sanballat had no official authority to change the king's authorization and commission to Nehemiah. He could only hope that such ridicule would weaken Nehemiah's determination.

Summarize Nehemiah's response to Sanballat's and Tobiah's insults. Neh. 4:4, 5. Do you see his reaction as a model for Christians? How did Christ respond to mockery? Matt. 26:47-50, 67; 27:27-31, 37-44; Luke 23:46.

Such insults and contempt could not but sting Nehemiah's feelings. Yet the patriot does not reply in kind. Once again, he finds courage by talking to God in prayer. The honor of God and of the builders is being besmirched. Nehemiah's prayer is similar to the plea of the martyrs of later centuries: "How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?" (Rev. 6:10).

Why weren't the workers discouraged? Neh. 4:6.

How does having a noble purpose help us to bear criticism and opposition? What happens to people when they are not focused?

THWARTING THREATS OF INVASION (Neh. 4:7-23).

The war of words turns into a war of nerves when remnants of the Philistine nation (the Ashdodites) join the alliance. Now the Jews are completely encircled by enemies: Samaritans to the north; Ammonites to the east; Arabians to the south; and Philistines to the west.

What did this alliance propose to do? Neh. 4:7, 8, 11. Summarize Nehemiah's reaction to this new threat. Verses 9, 13, 14.

Ten different times, Nehemiah heard rumors concerning this impending attack (verse 12). But his prayers helped him maintain his courage (verse 9). Momentarily, he halted the building program and armed the people, deploying them in family groups at the weakest points in the city's defenses (4:13). He charged them to remember that their strength was in the Lord and to fight for their brethren, sons and daughters, their wives and homes (verse 14). Nehemiah's decisive action robbed the alliance of the element of surprise, and they did not press their plan to invade (verse 15).

How did Nehemiah once again show his ability to plan and organize when he realized that armed invasion would remain a threat until they had reconstructed the city's defenses? Neh. 4:15-21.

"God shall fight for us. Nehemiah's confidence in divine help was contagious. He himself set a noble example, not only for his own people, but also for us in our mortal combat with the powers of evil. We can be confident that God will fight for us when we labor earnestly to build up His cause, when we attempt to overcome Satan, sin, and self, and when our motives are pure, our trust strong, and our weapons untarnished."—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 411.

Discouragement is one of Satan's fiery darts (Eph. 6:16). Nehemiah's vigorous action prevented the builders from slipping into such a state. What can you learn from his experience that will keep you from becoming a despondent Christian?

HIGH-LEVEL ACCUSATIONS OF TREASON (Neh. 6:1-14).

Nehemiah 6 portrays three attempts of sabotage and treason aimed at the very life of Nehemiah. Realizing Nehemiah was the driving force behind the campaign to restore Jerusalem's walls, his enemies sought to destroy him and his work.

Attempt No. 1: Neh. 6:1-4. Ono was about 27 miles northwest of Jerusalem. Perhaps Sanballat and Gesham were implying that this city's pleasant climate would give the patriot a chance to relax as he conferred with his fellow "governors." Perhaps a conference that discussed the mutual needs of their respective districts could defuse the hostility. The invitation appeared gracious. But Nehemiah was quick to read "between the lines" and respond with the words of this week's Memory Text. The "conference" would have cost him precious days. Furthermore, because Ono was in the border area of the Ashdodites and the Samaritans, the patriot perceived that these men intended "to do me mischief"—perhaps kidnapping or even murdering him. Sanballat's insistence exposed his intent.

Attempt No. 2: Neh. 6:5-9. Geshem (Gashmu) alleged to have heard a rumor that Nehemiah was building the defenses of Jerusalem so he could make himself king. Sanballat suggested that Artaxerxes would soon hear of such a report. No one was better aware of the capricious monarch than Nehemiah, his cupbearer. If the king were to receive such a report, Judah would fall under the royal wrath.

Attempt No. 3: Neh. 6:10-14. Shemaiah's confinement may have been a symbolic act to underscore his alleged oracle that Nehemiah was about to be assassinated and should take refuge within the holy place. Because Nehemiah was not a priest, such an act would have been a desecration worthy of death.

"The least indication of fear on Nehemiah's part at this critical time would have been fatal to the morale of the people. . . . One false step, and he would have been lost, his influence would have been gone, and the work on which his heart was set would have come to nought."—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 419.

The enemy attempts to stop us, just as he tried to stop Nehemiah. What are some of the diversions that prevent you from functioning as a church builder? What enabled Nehemiah to remain firm? Neh. 6:9. Make Nehemiah's prayer your own.

DIVIDED LOYALTIES (Neh. 6:15-19).

The month of Elul (Neh. 6:15), the sixth month of the Jewish religious year (August or September), marked a period of six months since Nehemiah made his request to the king for permission to repair the city of his fathers' sepulchers (Neh. 2:3). The last two months had been a time of intense activity, opposition, and radiant faith.

Nehemiah and his builders completed their building on three miles of wall in 52 days—less than two months (Neh. 6:15). Such a feat crowned at last the patient toil of Ezra and the people who some years earlier had evidently accomplished a large portion of the work before the Samaritans and Artaxerxes stopped them (Neh. 1:3; 4:7-23).

How did the Jews' enemies react, and what did they specifically acknowledge when they heard that the construction at Jerusalem was completed? Neh. 6:16 (compare 2:19, 20).

Although unity appeared to prevail among God's people, what picture of divided loyalties does Nehemiah disclose that made building difficult and sadly influenced the nation in the years to come? Neh. 6:17-19.

"The advocates of unpopular truth must expect opposition from its open enemies; this is often fierce and cruel, but it is far less dangerous than the secret enmity of those who profess to be serving God while at heart they are servants of Satan. While apparently uniting in the work of God, many are connected with His foes; and if in any way crossed in their plans or reprov'd for their sins, they court the favor of the enemies of truth, and open to them all the plans of God's servants and the workings of His cause. . . . Thus these men of two minds and two purposes pretend to serve God, and then go over to the enemy and serve him, as best suits their inclination."
—Ellen G. White, *Southern Watchman*, May 24, 1904.

In what ways might you be tempted to lend your support to persons or agencies that bring division and confusion to God's cause, although you sincerely profess loyalty and support of your church? How would you suggest divisions within the church can be corrected? How can you be sure you know who is causing disunity?

FURTHER STUDY: The Israelites needed faith to sustain them against their enemies' threats. What do the following texts teach about faith? How do these texts affect your relationship with God? Rom. 10:17; 1 Cor. 2:5; 2 Cor. 5:7; Eph. 6:13-16; Heb. 11:1; James 1:3; 2:17.

Read in *Prophets and Kings* the last half of "The Builders on the Wall," pp. 639-645, and "Heathen Plots," pp. 653-660.

"Bring faith into your experience. Faith lightens every burden, relieves every weariness. Providences that are now mysterious you may solve by continued trust in God. Walk by faith in the path He marks out. Trials will come, but go forward. This will strengthen your faith and fit you for service. The records of sacred history are written, not merely that we may read and wonder, but that the same faith which wrought in God's servants of old may work in us. In no less marked manner will the Lord work now, wherever there are hearts of faith to be channels of His power."—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 175.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Personal attacks on Nehemiah came just as he was about to complete his objective (Neh. 6:1). In what twofold manner did he meet them? How do you relate to personal attacks on your work and character?
2. Nehemiah influenced others positively. How can your words and actions encourage others to do their best for Christ? In your congregation, how can you influence others to work for Christ in a positive way? How can you counteract the divisions that appear?
3. Nehemiah's prayers helped him maintain his courage. How did prayer help Christ maintain His courage? Luke 6:12; Matt. 14:23; 26:36-46. Contrast Christ's strength with the disciples' weakness in Gethsemane. How can prayer strengthen your courage?

SUMMARY: Nehemiah and his builders met a determined array of opponents as they sought to restore the walls and gates of Jerusalem. Nevertheless, they succeeded in completing their task. Their secret? Continual prayer, persistence, and a refusal to be intimidated. They built with vigor because they believed God would honor their faith.

Ruthless Religion



Sabbath Afternoon

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Nehemiah 5.

MEMORY TEXT: "He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the Lord; and that which he hath given will he pay him again" (Proverbs 19:17).

KEY QUESTIONS: Why does the apostle Paul say that "the love of money is the root of all evil" (1 Tim. 6:10)? What prompts some Christians at times to make material gain from the misfortunes of others?

FLEECING THE FLOCK. Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807-1882) actively sought to free Italy from foreign rule. He owned a small farm on the island of Caprera in the Mediterranean Sea, where he would retire after periods of active duty.

One evening he sent his men to search for a lost sheep. About midnight, when they requested permission to call off the search, Garibaldi decided to look for the lamb himself. The next morning, his servants discovered him asleep, his arms clutching the lost sheep to his bosom!

One of the crimes that brought on the Babylonian captivity of Judah was shameless exploitation of the people by their leaders (see Eze. 34:2-6; Micah 3:1-3). Instead of shepherding with concern and compassion, they "fleeced" the Lord's flock, taking advantage of their helplessness. To Nehemiah's astonishment, a similar oppression suddenly surfaced among his workers. As you study this week's lesson, ask yourself how you can be extricated from the grip of materialism.

ECONOMIC DISTRESS (Neh. 5:1-5).

Summarize the cry of outrage that occurred among God's people during the national effort to build the wall. Neh. 5:1-4. What made this a particularly dangerous situation?

The situation was especially serious because it divided Jew against Jew at a time when their enemies were attempting to crush their resolve to rehabilitate the capital.

"One class of people complained of families so large that it was impossible to provide them with food, another of having mortgaged their property because of famine, a third of having to resort to the moneylenders in order to pay their taxes, and a fourth of having fallen into the hands of usurious moneylenders. These people were suffering, not from the oppression of foreign tyrants, but from the exactions of their brethren." —*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 413.

What did the poor have to do to ease their poverty? Why would this make them bitter? Neh. 5:5.

Within the law, the rich were practicing a ruthless, pitiless religion by lending money to their needy fellow citizens, but taking interest on their loans or securing their lands and possessions as security. They even took the children of their debtors as slaves.

"There appeared no hope of improving their condition, no way to regain either their lands or their children, no prospect before them but that of perpetual slavery. And yet they were of the same nation, children of the covenant equally with their more favored brethren. They had the same affection for their children as had the others. Their distress had not been caused by indolence or prodigality. They had been compelled to contract debts because of the failure of crops, and to pay heavy taxes." —Ellen G. White, *Southern Watchman*, May 3, 1904.

How do you relate to poverty in your family? in the lives of others? Why didn't the Jews of Ezra's and Nehemiah's time react to the poverty that existed among them as did the early Jewish Christians? Acts 4:32-37.

GOD'S PLAN TO HELP THE POOR (Deut. 15:11).

Ezra's plan—endorsed by the Persian king—was to restore the civil system of the Mosaic theocracy (Ezra 7:14, 25, 26). In unsettled times, however, central authority apparently was not yet strong enough to enforce the law.

Describe the general command of the Mosaic system that served as a springboard for more specific laws concerning care of the poor. Deut. 15:7-11.

What specific laws enabled the poor to have food on their tables during hard times? Lev. 19:9, 10 (Deut. 24:19-22; Ex. 23:10, 11).

How did the Mosaic system provide the poor with financial assistance? Lev. 25:35-40, 47, 48.

"The very fact that they were regarded by God as being members of a holy nation involved the Israelites in a sense of responsibility towards their fellows, especially the underprivileged. . . . Thus it was forbidden for an Israelite to advance a loan at interest to another member of the holy people (Dt. 23:20), since a loan would normally only be needed in an emergency of a kind that would make the payment of interest a difficult and embarrassing matter. . . . The taking of pledges was governed by strict rules (Dt. 24:10-13; cf. Ex. 22:26-27). Exploitation of needy persons was prohibited (Dt. 24:14-22) because it violated the principle of brotherhood which, in a holy nation, meant that all persons were equal before God, whatever their social status. Thus members of the body corporate must be treated in a just and humane manner."—R. K. Harrison, *Leviticus*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1980), p. 197.

How might you be taking advantage of another Christian in difficult circumstances? Who are the poor persons of today? (1) The man carrying a sign "I will work for food." (2) Children born in poverty. (3) Large Adventist families paying tuition. (4) A single parent struggling to make it on one income.

SUGGESTED SOLUTION (Neh. 5:6-11).

What was Nehemiah's reaction to the outcry from the families who had gathered around him? Neh. 5:6, 7.

Nehemiah knew that condemnation and censure seldom, if ever, move people to do right. Some scholars have noted that the word translated "usury" or "interest" (Neh. 5:7, 10) is peculiar to Nehemiah and, although related, is not the common word used elsewhere for "usury." They suggest that the people's complaint was, not over high interest rates, but over the lending of money upon the security of their lands and houses with forfeiture of these basic possessions when circumstances prevented their making payments.

Outline the reasoning Nehemiah used to show the nobles how shabbily they were treating their poorer brethren. Neh. 5:8-10. What solution did he suggest? Verse 11.

The patriot's first argument shamed the nobles into silence. Nehemiah said in effect, "We, as far as we have been able, have been buying the release of our brethren in slavery among the Gentiles; but you, by contrast, are selling them into slavery! Shouldn't you set a higher example before our Gentile enemies?" Finally, he identified himself with the rulers and nobles. Verse 10 reads literally, "I also, my brethren and servants are lending them silver and grain." He and his party probably did not charge interest, but now he felt the depths of the distress many were undergoing.

The expression "the hundredth part" (Neh. 5:11) is understood by some commentators to refer to the interest charged on the loans, perhaps 12 percent a year. Others think it refers to the income that the creditors derived from the property they held in pledge.

"It was shown me that those who preside over our institutions should ever bear in mind that there is a chief director, who is the God of heaven. There should be strict honesty in all business transactions in every department of the work. There must be firmness in preserving order, but compassion, mercy, and forbearance should be mingled with the firmness."—Testimonies, vol. 5, p. 559.

A NOBLE RESPONSE (Neh. 5:12, 13).

In what forthright manner did the rulers and nobles respond to Nehemiah's plea? Neh. 5:12.

When the Spirit of God moves on the heart, it releases one's selfish grasp and urges the sharing of resources with those who are less fortunate. It will also prompt a retracing of steps to right previous wrongs. The actions of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:8) are similar to the actions of the rulers and nobles in Nehemiah's day who publicly promised to restore, without further charge, the lands and homes of their brethren that they had taken as security.

"The Christian in his business life is to represent to the world the manner in which our Lord would conduct business enterprises. In every transaction he is to make it manifest that God is his teacher. 'Holiness unto the Lord' is to be written upon daybooks and ledgers, on deeds, receipts, and bills of exchange. . . .

"If we have injured others through any unjust business transaction, if we have overreached in trade, or defrauded any man, even though it be within the pale of the law, we should confess our wrong, and make restitution as far as lies in our power. It is right for us to restore not only that which we have taken, but all that it would have accumulated if put to a right and wise use during the time it has been in our possession."—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 556.

What visual aid did Nehemiah use to underscore the seriousness of the oath that the nobles and rulers had taken? How did the congregation respond? Neh. 5:13.

A crisis was averted that could have shattered the nation and left the people open to ridicule by their enemies. If Nehemiah had waited for the problem to go away, a civil war might have ensued. His willingness to right terrible wrongs and promote a spirit of charity and brotherly love helped save the day.

Why do some persons claim that it is impossible for a Christian to practice Christian principles in the business world? How would you refute their logic? How can you practice Christian principles more thoroughly in your business dealings?

EXAMPLE LEADERSHIP (Neh. 5:14-19).

There is truth in the old saying: "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Not many—even within the church—can properly relate to the authority, power, and privilege that comes with high position. So Jewish nobles and rulers gave in to greedy practices that their position made possible. The example of Nehemiah's leadership appears in marked contrast.

To what position did the king evidently appoint Nehemiah when he gave him permission to restore Jerusalem? Neh. 5:14. Perceiving the condition of the people, what privileges of his position did he willingly forego? Neh. 5:14-16.

Nehemiah had a shepherd's heart. His arms of compassion embraced his distressed flock. He would not, could not take advantage of them. He spent and was spent with a willing heart for the well-being of his people. His example was leadership at its best, self-sacrificing, forceful, and successful. Reflect upon how the same can be said of Christ.

Although Nehemiah did not accept the revenue of a governor, what evidence is there that he maintained a hospitable court at his own expense? Was he being boastful in recalling before God the years of his self-denying rule? Can you identify a higher motivation? Neh. 5:17-19.

Hospitality and sharing are means in our hands to attract others to the Saviour we love.

"We are near the close of time, when Satan has come down, having great wrath, knowing that his time is short. . . . The warfare has been left in our hands by our great Leader for us to carry forward with vigor. We are not doing a twentieth part of what we might do if we were awake. The work is retarded by love of ease and a lack of the self-denying spirit of which our Saviour has given us an example in His life."
—*Testimonies*, vol. 3, p. 407.

Many today are sensitive about personal rights. But little is said about responsible self-denial. What motivates a life of self-denial such as Nehemiah lived? What kind of leadership do you display in your church and neighborhood?

FURTHER STUDY: While the Israelites were rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, the serious matter of the rich oppressing the poor arose. What similar situation occurred in the New Testament, and how did the people resolve it? Acts 6:1-7. How do the following texts help us to understand the importance of caring for the poor? Matt. 19:16-22; 25:31-46; Isa. 58:1-11.

Read "A Rebuke Against Extortion" in *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 646-652.

"The customs of the world are no criterion for the Christian. He is not to imitate their sharp practise, overreaching, and extortion, even in small matters. Every unjust act toward a fellow mortal, though he be the veriest sinner, is a violation of the golden rule. Every wrong done to the children of God is done to Christ Himself in the person of His saints. Every attempt to advantage one's self by the ignorance, weakness, or misfortune of another, is registered as fraud in the ledger of heaven."—Ellen G. White, *Southern Watchman*, May 10, 1904.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How might the laws studied in Monday's lesson relieve poverty conditions existing today? In areas where there is little farming, what can people do to assist the poor with their need for food?
2. How is Deuteronomy 15:7-11 similar to the golden rule? See Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 7:12.
3. Nehemiah did not condemn those he wished to change. How might following his example increase church membership and prevent some from leaving through the back door?
4. What did Nehemiah do to avert a crisis? Would these steps work in our churches today?

SUMMARY: Unjust and oppressive financial transactions threatened the success of Nehemiah's building program and the well-being of the nation. The experience underlines the truth that our business dealings do not lie outside our religious beliefs. Religion and morality are to operate in the marketplace six days a week as well as in the house of God on Sabbath. The golden rule is the Christian guide.

Spiritual Rehabilitation



Sabbath Afternoon

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Nehemiah 8-10.

MEMORY TEXT: "They clave to their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse, and into an oath, to walk in God's law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord, and his judgments and his statutes" (Nehemiah 10:29).

KEY QUESTION: Why is it necessary for a Christian to take stock occasionally of his or her spiritual experience?

REHABILITATION. In 1989 a medical team in Sweden successfully grafted several thousand fetal brain cells—enough to fill a large teardrop—into the brain of a patient with Parkinson's disease. Implanted fetal tissue grows easily and provokes no rejection by the body. In this instance, the cells generate and release dopamine, a chemical essential for normal muscle movement. Previously unable to walk, the patient has since personally renovated his home. (*Washington Post*, March 27, 1990.)

Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, the "implanted word" (James 1:21, RSV) can in like manner bring about a new spiritual life. This is what occurred in the early months of Nehemiah's governorship. While the builders labored to rehabilitate Jerusalem, God's Spirit worked to rehabilitate the builders! Ask yourself in what way your spiritual life needs renewing.

NEW YEAR'S DAY, 444 B.C. (Neh. 8:1-12).

Immediately after the people finished constructing Jerusalem's walls, they assembled in the city to celebrate the new year. In less than a week they would observe the Day of Atonement and the harvest Feast of Tabernacles. These events were the most spiritually moving occasions of Nehemiah's governorship.

Describe how the Jews celebrated the new year. On this occasion in particular, how did they celebrate it? Lev. 23:24, 25; Neh. 8:1-5.

Ezra's quiet teaching of the Scriptures during the previous 13 years was beginning to have its effect. The people themselves requested their spiritual leader to read to them from the Pentateuch (Neh. 8:1).

New Year's Day was also referred to as the Blowing of Trumpets. The sound of these instruments alerted the people to the solemn events of the approaching Day of Atonement.

The 13 men who stood with Ezra (verse 4), probably priests, took turns with him in reading. The 13 additional men (verse 7) were probably Levites who stood level with the people and may have moved among them to explain the readings. Since the meeting lasted about five or six hours (verse 3), it is doubtful that Ezra and his associates read without a break or that the people continually stood. More likely, the reading alternated with explanations by the Levites, during which the congregation was seated.

How did this public study of the Scriptures affect the people? What did Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites encourage the people to do? Neh. 8:5, 6, 9-12.

Sorrow for our sins has its proper place and time, but the center of biblical religion is God's graciousness. Nehemiah declared, "Let there be no sadness, for joy in the Lord is your strength" (Neh. 8:10, NEB).

"Those who abide in Jesus will be happy, cheerful, and joyful in God."—*Testimonies*, vol. 4, p. 626.

What kind of Bible study makes your heart tender and repentant? Why can your spiritual rehabilitation not take place without a contrite heart? (See Ps. 51:17.)

A TIME FOR REJOICING (Neh. 8:13-18).

The day after New Year's, only the heads of families reassembled to listen to the reading of Scripture (Neh. 8:13). The people had dispersed to their homes after the service of the previous day. Scripture omits reference to the observance of the Day of Atonement, but "at the time appointed—on the tenth day of the seventh month—the solemn services of the Day of Atonement were performed, according to the command of God."—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 665.

As these leaders continued their Bible study, what festival did they determine to observe, and what preparations did they make for it? Neh. 8:14, 15.

During their continued study, the "chief of the fathers" realized that they had lost sight of the Feast of Tabernacles. The Jews in the first migration celebrated it more than 90 years earlier (Ezra 3:11). But perhaps they had observed it only in a general way.

What evidence is there that the people entered heartily into the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles? Neh. 8:16, 17. How did they spend the seven days of this festival? Neh. 8:18.

The study of the Scriptures began on New Year's Day and continued daily throughout the Feast of Tabernacles. It must have been like a giant camp meeting, with the people living in booths made from branches (tents) and attending services at which priests and Levites read and explained the Word of the Lord. Reoriented to the compass of God's Word, the families of Israel—parents and children—were becoming a Bible-centered people. Ezra and Nehemiah did not intend the people to become worshipers of a book, but to be keen followers of their Creator and Redeemer revealed therein. As Jesus later said: "The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life" (John 6:63). So the Word of God—studied and assimilated—promotes vigorous spiritual life.

How can we obtain that hungering for God's Word that Israel had under the guidance of Ezra and Nehemiah? How can we help someone else love it?

REPENTANCE, CONFESSION, AND PRAISE (Neh. 9:1-6).

Two days after the Feast of Tabernacles, the Jews separated themselves from their pagan friends, donned sackcloth, and appeared before the wooden platform that Ezra had used. Here they wished to confess and repent of their sins. This meeting was a special time for Israel to be alone with God. Pagan friends would not have understood. And their presence would have distracted the people from their self-examination and confession.

How was God's Word involved in this meeting? After their study, what did the people do? Neh. 9:2, 3.

"Why confess the sins of their fathers? It is to be remembered that this was a national gathering for national humiliation, introductory to a better national life. In such an assembly a review of the nation's sins would be very appropriate and profitable. It recalled the great cause of past national suffering, and of present degradation and subjection. It brought into light what must be avoided if better times were to arise. It produced the personal conviction of participation in the sins of those gone before, and the necessity of abandoning them. It enhanced the feeling of the great forbearance and mercy of God towards their nation."—"Homiletics," on *Nehemiah* 1:1-3, Pulpit Commentary (Chicago: Wilcox & Follett Company, n.d.), vol. 15, p. 97.

Two groups of Levites were involved in this special service. Describe what both groups did. Neh. 9:4, 5. Summarize the content of the people's song. Verses 5, 6.

Since the first group of Levites are said to have "cried with a loud voice unto the Lord," they may have closed the season of public confession and prayer from the platform with prayer while the people remained kneeling. When their praying ceased, the second band of Levites called the people to stand and praise the Lord in singing.

How do you express appreciation and gratitude for what the Creator-Redeemer has done for you? What should participation in congregational hymn singing mean to you?

RECALLING GOD'S GRACIOUS ACTS (Neh. 9:7-35).

Most commentators regard Ezra 9:7-35 as a prayer by Ezra because in Nehemiah 9:6 the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) inserts the phrase "and Ezra said." Ellen White writes that in these verses the leaders relate Israel's history. (See *Prophets and Kings*, p. 666.) These verses are both a historical recital and a prayer. Ezra 9:7-35 divides into the following two parts.

Part 1: Verses 7-25 describe how God guided in the formation of their nation. Recalling God's guidance in the past is a healthy corrective against the self-centeredness of human nature. Wrote Ellen White, "We have nothing to fear for the future except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us."—*Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 31.

Verses 15-25 record God's blessing to Israel during the Exodus and their 40 years in the wilderness. But it also lists Israel's failures. Note below some of each.

"Throughout this miraculous pilgrimage, 'they lacked nothing' . . . and appreciated nothing. . . . This part of their history ends with an undeserved and unstinted inheritance, 'full of all good things.'"—Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, p. 112.

Part 2: Verses 26-35 focus on the judges, the monarchy, and how Israel slew the prophets who sought to turn them back to God (verses 26, 30). Verse 32 mentions that God permitted Assyria to rule over the nation.

The Israelites did not blame God for their past. In closing, what did they admit and confess? Neh. 9:33.

Just as the rocky coastline continually throws back the ocean's waves, so Israel had vigorously rejected the great surges of divine love. The people to whom Ezra and Nehemiah ministered were not present when their ancestors sinned, but, without genuine repentance, the tendencies of their own lives would have led them in the same direction.

What is wrong with your repentance and confession when you blame God or others for your unfortunate condition?

COVENANT RELATIONSHIPS RENEWED (Neh. 9:36-10:29).

As the people ended their time of confession, they admitted the despicable state of their nation. They were now servants in a land they once possessed.

What did the assembly determine to draw up and sign? Neh. 9:36-38; 10:1. Summarize the document. Neh. 10:29.

Tirshatha (Neh. 10:1) is a Persian loan-word meaning "governor." Zidkijah was most likely Nehemiah's secretary. The people were so determined to serve God that a simple oral commitment would not suffice. They wanted to express the intent of their sacred vow through a written document they could sign. Eighty-four leading citizens attached their names by seal. Twenty-one heads of priestly families (verses 2-8) together with 17 heads of Levitical families (verses 9-13) signed the covenant. The remaining 44 names belonged to heads of important families.

How did the others signify their intention to enter into this solemn covenant with God? Neh. 10:28, 29.

Wives and mature children (verse 28) participated with the men in the oral oath and curse of their covenant, thus making it a family affair as well as a national one.

"Nehemiah's efforts to restore the worship of the true God had been crowned with success. As long as the people were true to the oath they had taken, as long as they were obedient to God's word, so long would the Lord fulfill His promise by pouring rich blessings upon them. . . .

"Every true turning to the Lord brings abiding joy into the life. When a sinner yields to the influence of the Holy Spirit, he sees his own guilt and defilement in contrast with the holiness of the great Searcher of hearts. . . . He may rejoice in the sense of sins forgiven, in the love of a pardoning heavenly Father."—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 668.

If you were to recall your past life, what would it show about your relationship to God? What are your priorities? If you were to draw up a written covenant with God, what would you include?

FURTHER STUDY: What do the following verses say about the necessity of confession and repentance? Prov. 28:13; 1 John 1:9; Luke 13:5; Acts 3:19. How willing is God to accept our confession and repentance? Luke 15:11-24.

Read "Instructed in the Law of God" in *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 661-668.

"How mistaken are those who imagine that confession of sin will detract from their dignity, and lessen their influence among their fellow men. Clinging to this erroneous idea, though seeing their faults, many fail to confess them, but rather pass by the wrongs they have done others, so embittering their own lives, and shadowing the lives of others. It will not hurt your dignity to confess your sins. Away with this false dignity. Fall on the Rock and be broken, and Christ will give you the true and heavenly dignity. Let not pride, self-esteem, or self-righteousness keep anyone from confessing his sin. . . . Keep nothing back from God, and neglect not the confession of your faults to your brethren."—*Selected Messages*, book 1, pp. 326, 327.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. In the experience of spiritual renewal, how specific should an individual's repentance, confession, and commitment be?
2. In Nehemiah 9:5-37, the Jews listened reverently to a recital of their history. How often do you recall the Lord's leading in your life? In what major events or decisions was He directly involved? Why is such an exercise a helpful work of grace?
3. What value do you see in corporately admitting the failures of our spiritual ancestors, confessing the sins and tendencies of our lives, and entering into a new covenant with God to live entirely for Him and to finish the work He has committed to us?

SUMMARY: All Israel participated in the special services of the seventh month: New Year's Day, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles. At this time, several days of intense Scripture study led to recalling Israel's historical experience. A revival resulted as people confessed their sins and renewed their covenant with God. Prayerful study of the Scriptures by today's church and putting away sinful practices will bring like results for us.

Public Pledges



Sabbath Afternoon

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Nehemiah 7:1-73; 10:30-39; 11:1-36; 12:1-47; 13:1-31.

MEMORY TEXT: "We will not forsake the house of our God" (Nehemiah 10:39).

KEY QUESTIONS: What is the difference between a revival and a reformation? Can a reformation succeed without revival? Does a revival amount to anything without reform? How can both be obtained and maintained?

REAL REFORM. A 40-year-old woman declared to a well-known counselor after a devastating experience and heart attack, "My life has taken a 180-degree turn." She quit smoking, joined a Weight Watchers Club, and lost 58 pounds. She also limited her dietary intake of salt, fat, and cholesterol, and adopted a daily exercise program. "For the first time in my life," she wrote, "I know what good health is."

Unwittingly, this woman became a "reformer." She chose to adopt certain reforms in her lifestyle. To her amazement she has discovered a degree of health she never knew before. Most persons shy away from the idea of "reform." To them the word seems to fit a sickly asceticism that "enjoys" depreciating the good life. In reality, the reforms that bring us physically, mentally, or spiritually into harmony with God's will always result in true happiness. As you study this week's lesson, ask yourself how you can reform and renew your life.

KEEPING OUR PROMISES TO GOD (Neh. 10:30-39).

Lesson 10 closed with Jewish leaders and people renewing their covenant relationship with God. We will now study the particular pledges made publicly on that solemn occasion.

List the first four pledges made in connection with the oath to be loyal to God's will (verse 29). Neh. 10:30, 31.

These reforms in marriage practices, Sabbath observance, land management, and business might seem to deny Judah both wealth and happiness. But "peace is the reward of those who love thy law," the psalmist affirms (Ps. 119:165, NEB).

"God does not require us to give up anything that it is for our best interest to retain. In all that He does, He has the well-being of His children in view. Would that all who have not chosen Christ might realize that He has something vastly better to offer them than they are seeking for themselves. Man is doing the greatest injury and injustice to his own soul when he thinks and acts contrary to the will of God. No real joy can be found in the path forbidden by Him who knows what is best and who plans for the good of His creatures."—*Steps to Christ*, p. 46.

What provision did the leaders and people agree to make for supporting the temple services, and how did they decide to support the priests and Levites? Neh. 10:32-38.

This promise to pay temple expenses is a healthy sign of growing spiritual maturity. As the ancient priests were supported by tithe, so are the church's pastors today. (See 1 Cor. 9:8-14.) Loyalty to the Lord and to His church involves bringing "all the tithes into the storehouse" (Mal. 3:10).

Summarize the general promise that concluded the assembly's covenant. Neh. 10:39.

To what extent are you shouldering the expenses of the church? Can you truthfully say, "I will not forsake the house of my God"?

REORGANIZATION OF CITY AND COMMUNITY
(Nehemiah 7, 11).

Describe the security arrangements Nehemiah made for the temple and city. Neh. 7:1-3.

Nehemiah fully realized that prominent families had intermarried with some of the nation's worst enemies (Neh. 6:17-19). An appointee from such a family might turn traitor. Nehemiah knew he could count on Hanani's loyalty.

Normally, gates were opened at sunrise and closed at sunset. But in their present state of insecurity, Nehemiah's order seems to have meant: open late; close early. Furthermore, selected civilians were organized into a security force so that the city was always under guard.

Palace (verse 2). This probably refers to the temple fortress on the north side of the sacred area.

Every one in his watch (verse 3). "The guards were divided into watches, being on duty a certain number of hours each day and during the night."—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 422.

What other problem did Nehemiah face, and how did he solve it? Neh. 7:4, 5; 11:1, 2.

God's people who returned from Babylon chose to live near their fields rather than among the ruins of Jerusalem. But the restored defenses now gave the capital a future and a function. The national administrators (Neh. 11:1), many from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin (verse 4), numerous priestly and Levitical families, as well as the porters and their families (verses 10, 15, 19), volunteered to live in the city. Nehemiah evidently used the old registry that Zerubbabel had drawn up (Ezra 2:1-70) to estimate the current population, a tenth of whom he now asked to resettle in the capital.

The names of Christians are written in the "registry" of the New Jerusalem (see Heb. 12:22-24). What does that fact mean to you personally (see Luke 10:20)? How may you have the continuing assurance that your name is retained there (see Rev. 3:5)?

PROVISIONS FOR TEMPLE WORSHIP (Neh. 12:1-26, 44-47; 13:1-3).

After the people dedicated themselves to the support of the temple and its workers, Nehemiah established a system to channel this support.

Priestly lists (Neh. 12:1-7, 12-21). It is possible that he used these lists as a basis upon which he could determine the distribution of the tithe (see Neh. 10:38). Also, because the lists have either 21 or 22 family names, he may have wanted to arrange the priests in the 24 courses of service David had established for the temple (see 1 Chron. 24:1-24; Luke 1:5).

How did the leaders carry out the provisions of the covenant to support temple personnel? Neh. 12:44-47.

Technical aspects of the support system were now in place. Next, personnel were appointed to oversee the storing and distribution of tithes and offerings to be divided among the priests, singers, and the porters of the temple gates.

What attempt was made to stand free from the surrounding pagan influences? Neh. 13:1-3. How can you reconcile the command that the Ammonites and Moabites "should not come into the congregation of God for ever" with God's statement that His house shall be "an house of prayer for all people" (Isa. 56:7)?

You will recall that the Israelites were intermarrying with unconverted Ammonites and Moabites and that the children of these marriages were forgetting the Jewish language and thus were unable to read or understand Hebrew Scripture (Neh. 13:23, 24). Yet, should any Ammonite or Moabite come as a convert, as Ruth the Moabitess did, that person would discover that God's house is indeed "an house of prayer for all people."

Personal revival and reformation include separating oneself from sin. This the Israelites did in separating themselves from the mixed multitude. To experience revival in your spiritual life, from what sins do you need to separate yourself? Ask God now to help you do so.

DEDICATION OF THE WALL (Neh. 12:27-43).

After you read Nehemiah 12:27, list words or phrases that express or imply joy.

Reformation and revival lead to joy. The priests and Levites gathered to purify themselves, the people, the gates, and the walls. The ceremony symbolized the purifying of one's life from sin—a needed step in any true reformation and revival.

Describe the great event that occurred next. Neh. 12:31-40.

Imagine being a member of the congregation that is observing the grand march of secular and ecclesiastical leaders. Their lines along the wall encompass you as one group marches in one direction while the other group marches in the opposite direction. Over your head, musical fanfares pierce the air. When the two groups meet on the eastern wall opposite the temple, they descend into the temple courts, where they continue to praise the Lord and offer sacrifices of thanksgiving (verses 40-43). What a difference from when the temple cornerstone was laid more than 90 years earlier (Ezra 3:11-13)!

Compare Nehemiah 12:43 with 12:27. The passage describing the dedication ends as it began. Notice the words and phrases in verse 43 that denote joy.

Does the joy in Nehemiah's Jerusalem seem strange? Perhaps it is because we subscribe to the theory that the person who acquires and succeeds is the happiest. But Nehemiah and Paul knew that joy is *spiritual*.

"Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice' [Phil. 4:4]. If we would guard our words, so that nothing but kindness shall escape our lips, we will give evidence that we are preparing to become members of the heavenly family."—*Medical Ministry*, p. 213.

We usually dedicate lifeless objects, such as churches and walls, only once. Why is it necessary for us continually to rededicate ourselves?

NEHEMIAH'S SECOND TERM (Neh. 13:1-31).

For 12 years Nehemiah governed the province of Judah (Neh. 5:14; 13:6). But in Artaxerxes' 32nd year (433/432 B.C.), he returned for a time to the royal court. In his absence, the promises of the people tragically crumbled like ropes of sand.

When Nehemiah returned, he found unfaithfulness in four different areas: (1) priestly behavior; (2) tithing; (3) Sabbath-keeping; and (4) marriage.

1. Priestly behavior (Neh. 13:4-9). In Nehemiah's absence the high priest, Eliashib, provided living quarters in the temple complex for the God-defying Ammonite, Tobiah.

Do you think Nehemiah's reaction to this situation was justified? Why or why not? Neh. 13:8, 9.

2. Tithing (Neh. 13:10-13). "While the guilt of profaning the Temple lay especially with the priestly class, that of withholding the tithes was mainly chargeable to the rulers and nobles. As the leaders they had apparently set a bad example to the people, and were especially to be blamed for the deplorable conditions."—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 450.

The tithes were important because the temple services pointed to the Messiah. Without these services, the Jews would be in greater danger of forgetting about His coming.

3. Sabbathkeeping (Neh. 13:15-22). In verse 18, Nehemiah reminds them that previous violations of the fourth commandment resulted in the Babylon captivity. Compare Jer. 17:21-27; Eze. 22:8, 26; 23:38.

4. Marriage (Neh. 13:23-26). Concerning mixed marriages, Nehemiah refers the people to Solomon (verse 26), an example "more likely than any other to move the Jews. What the author of 1 Kings 11:3 had euphemistically referred to as turning aside of the heart, Nehemiah bluntly and openly calls 'sin.'"—*SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 452.

Are there discrepancies in your life regarding any of these four areas? If so, how can you experience a revival and reformation? The Lord, through His Holy Spirit, invites and will empower you to dedicate your all to Him.

FURTHER STUDY: First Samuel 7:1-6 and 1 Kings 18:17-40 record instances of revival. What major elements are present in these accounts that are similar to the revival account we studied this week?

Read "Reformation," *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 669-678.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. This week we learned about the importance of God's tithe in supporting temple services. How is tithe just as important today? In what ways are tithes and offerings a sign of our loyalty to God?
2. Even after Jerusalem's walls were completed, God's people still needed to guard against enemies. What enemies does the church need to guard against today? What enemies do you personally need to guard against? What is our best defense?

SUMMARY: Revival and reformation cannot be maintained if faith is compromised. Apostasy in leadership quickly leads to apostasy in the ranks. Individual renewal on a daily basis, resulting in commitment to God and His will, is the only way we can maintain a consistent, growing Christian life.



Thank you, faithful Sabbath School mission supporters!

A Thirteenth Sabbath Offering in 1982 for the development of the Adventist University of Central Africa helped to build this fine structure which houses the classroom block and business offices.

The Africa-Indian Ocean Division needs your help again December 18.

Behind the Story



Sabbath Afternoon

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Ezra 1:1; 9:8; 6:15-18; Neh. 1:11; 8:1.

MEMORY TEXT: "The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build" (Nehemiah 2:20).

KEY QUESTION: "What experience and history teach is this—that people and governments never have learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it" (Georg Hegel). While this may be true of secular history, it need not be true of sacred history. What truths may we learn from the accounts of Ezra and Nehemiah?

LIFE SUPPORT. In 1986 Jacqueline Cole suffered a massive stroke. For 41 days, life-support systems kept her alive. Her prognosis? "A persistent vegetative state." Mrs. Cole's husband requested the removal of all life supports. But a judge refused. Six days later Mrs. Cole awoke! Now, after four years, she is almost fully recovered.

The "stroke" of sin rendered the Jews unconscious to God's love. But because He is merciful, He granted them a reprieve. The accounts of Ezra and Nehemiah do not merely inform us about Jewish history. They also awaken in us a deeper understanding of the God we love and worship. Behind the history are truths about God that are important to modern Christians and the spiritual challenges we face.

GOD'S ACTIVE PRESENCE (Ezra 1:1).

Today, millions of persons deny the existence of God as the Bible reveals Him. Even many Christians entertain false views about Him. But not Ezra and Nehemiah. Their inspired records breathe His very presence as they trace His guidance in behalf of Judah.

How did Ezra and Nehemiah interpret the favor shown to the Jews by the Persian kings? Ezra 1:1; 6:22; 7:27, 28. In their activities for Judah, of what were Ezra and Nehemiah conscious? Ezra 5:5; Neh. 2:8 (compare Ezra 7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31; Neh. 2:18).

While in the midst of tragedy we may cry out, "Where is God?" the Scriptures disclose a Deity who is not forgetful of His people or His promises. This is one of the first truths we learn from the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Discernment and inward conviction. Neither Ezra nor Nehemiah viewed the events of their lives as subject to chance. The eye of their God was upon them, and they affirmed that the hand of the Lord was likewise upon them. This they knew because of an inward conviction by the Holy Spirit, and especially by their discernment of God's providences in opening doors, in resolving overwhelming difficulties, and in delivering them from their enemies. Their spiritual insight was quick to recognize God's leading in the events that favored Judah's restoration.

What do these historical books teach about the union of divine and human effort to accomplish God's mission? Neh. 2:18, 20; 4:9, 17, 20 (compare Matt. 28:18, 19).

"All heaven is waiting for men and women through whom God can reveal the power of Christianity. The church is God's agency for the proclamation of truth, empowered by Him to do a special work; and if she is loyal to Him, obedient to all His commandments, there will dwell within her the excellency of divine grace."—*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 600.

As a Christian, how can you develop and maintain a sense of God's presence in your life? Ps. 16:8; Heb. 11:27.

GOD'S REMNANT PEOPLE (Ezra 9:8).

In Ezra 9:2, 8, the words *seed* and *remnant* describe those who returned to Judah from Babylonian captivity. The "remnant" was as small as a seed compared to the number of people who could have returned. Less than 50,000 returned in the first migration and scarcely a sixth of that figure in the second.

What inspired policy was essential to the remnant if it was to succeed in its mission? Ezra 4:3; 10:2, 3, 19; Neh. 10:30; 13:3, 30. What counsel does the New Testament give regarding this same problem? 2 Cor. 6:14-18.

The true remnant in Israel was always those who placed their trust in God and lived in harmony with His will. Such a people were not only small in numbers, but at God's direction, separate from the world lest godless cultures engulf them. The concept of separateness commits God's people to watchfulness and an unending struggle. Worldly philosophies and evils always pressured Israel (as they do the church today) and at times succeeded in penetrating her defenses and marring her spiritual purity.

"There is constant danger that professing Christians will come to think that in order to have influence with worldlings, they must to a certain extent conform to the world. But though such a course may appear to afford great advantages, it always ends in spiritual loss."—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 570.

Related to the word *remnant* is the word *reform*. Into what reforms did Ezra and Nehemiah lead the remnant of Israel? Neh. 10:30-39; 13:15-22; 5:7-12. On what does the end-time "remnant" base its reforms? Rev. 12:17.

"God's remnant people, standing before the world as reformers, are to show that the law of God is the foundation of all enduring reform."—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 678.

As a member of the end-time remnant, how can you be separate from the world, yet function as "the salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:13)? How did Jesus mingle with sinners (Luke 19:7) and yet remain separate from them?

GOD'S RESTORED WORSHIP (Ezra 6:15, 16).

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah emphasize rebuilding the temple and restoring its worship services.

Why was temple worship so essential to Israel that the altar of burnt offering was functioning within a few weeks after the first group of immigrants arrived in Jerusalem? Ezra 3:1-3.

The sacrifices offered in the temple pointed clearly to Jesus, the Messiah about whom Israel was to tell the world. The temple "provided the means of grace whereby Israel could continue to be kept in the bond of [the] covenant. . . . Through the sanctuary cultus mercy could be obtained for the truly repentant. Here the confessing Israelite could receive forgiveness of sin and release from his guilt. The blessings of the covenant could be retained, and spiritual growth—restoring the image of God in his life—could continue."—Frank B. Holbrook, "The Israelite Sanctuary," *The Sanctuary and the Atonement*, A. V. Wallenkampf and W. R. Leshner, eds. (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1981), p. 13.

One of the striking features of Ezra and Nehemiah is the record of the festivals and dedications in which the people participated. (Review Ezra 3:4, 10; 6:15-17, 19-22; Neh. 8:2, 9, 10, 14-17; 12:27.)

What would you say was the purpose of the festivals and dedications? Why is the worship of God important? What has the Lord asked Christians to remember? Ex. 20:8-11; 1 Cor. 11:24, 25; Rev. 14:6, 7.

The Sabbath and the Lord's Supper prompt us to "remember" who the Lord is, what He has done for us, and what He will do for us in the future. Remembering and praising our God keeps us resting in peace upon His gracious promises.

Analyze how you personally observe the Sabbath and the Lord's Supper. What basic principles should govern the manner in which we observe these special occasions for worship? How can you make them occasions of praise and joy for yourself, your family, and your friends?

GOD'S RESPONSE TO PRAYER (Neh. 1:11).

We have seen how the active presence of God pervades the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Today we will study how these records are filled with earnest prayers and God's gracious answers.

Describe intercessory prayer. How do we limit a favorable answer to this kind of prayer? What examples of intercessory prayer do we read in Ezra and Nehemiah? Ezra 9:5-15; Neh. 1:4-11.

Scripture teaches us that we should pray one for another (Job 42:10; Matt. 5:44; James 5:13-16). Such prayer better enables the Holy Spirit to move upon the hearts of those we pray for, although God will not violate the will of any person. Moses and other prophets are known for their intercessions in behalf of their people. Jesus' great prayer of intercession included the apostles and all Christians down to the end of time (John 17). Prayer changes things, and Ezra was privileged to see an immediate response in the penitential tears of his people and their determination to correct their behavior (Ezra 10:1-4).

Review the types of prayer request in Ezra and Nehemiah. What are some things these requests teach us about prayer? Which parts of these prayers can you adapt to your life? (1) Ezra 8:21-23, 31; (2) Neh. 1:11; (3) Neh. 4:9; (4) Neh. 6:9; (5) Neh. 13:29; (6) Neh. 13:14.

"There is no time or place in which it is inappropriate to offer up a petition to God. . . . In the crowds of the street, in the midst of a business engagement, we may send up a petition to God and plead for divine guidance, as did Nehemiah when he made his request before King Artaxerxes. A closet of communion may be found wherever we are."—*Steps to Christ*, p. 99.

It is evident that Ezra and Nehemiah lived in an atmosphere of prayer. What can you do this week to obtain a reverent-but-intimate acquaintance with your heavenly Father and with Jesus, your Saviour and Redeemer? How can you adjust your daily program so that you and your family have more time for communion with God?

GOD'S WRITTEN WORD (Neh. 8:1).

A major source of spiritual life is the Word of God studied under the influence of the Holy Spirit. The Scriptures played a central role in the revival and reformation of the "remnant" of Israel in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. And they are central to that experience for the remnant today. The life of Christ, our Redeemer, is in His Word.

Whom did the Jews recognize as speaking to them in the written "law of Moses"—the Scriptures? Ezra 7:6; Neh. 8:1.

Although the people recognized that Moses was God's penman, it was Yahweh who "had commanded" or "ordered" His people through the prophet (Neh. 8:1). It was one of Israel's greatest privileges to be entrusted with the written Scriptures (Rom. 3:1, 2).

What evidence is there that the people hungered to hear the Word of God preached and explained? Neh. 8:1, 2, 13, 18 (compare Matt. 5:6).

Four characteristics of Israel's remnant stand out in these accounts: (1) *Their smallness*. Theirs was not a popular cause even among their fellow Jews, the majority of whom chose to remain in their adopted lands. (2) *Their separateness*. They knew that compromising their faith would extinguish their witness. (3) *The Scriptures*. They accepted the Bible as their rule of faith and practice. (4) *Their success*. Repentance, evidenced in obedience (active faith), resulted in reformation, revival, and a successful building program.

From this point on, the Jews became a "people of the Book." But they overlooked Christ—the Book's central focus (John 5:39, 40). How can you become knowledgeable in God's Word, yet have more than a mere theory of truth?

"Without the Spirit of God a knowledge of His word is of no avail. . . . One may be familiar with the commands and promises of the Bible; but unless the Spirit of God sets the truth home, the character will not be transformed."—*Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 408.

FURTHER STUDY: This week we studied how beneficial it was for the Israelites to remember their history. The psalmist also was aware of this benefit. Read Psalm 105. Write a short psalm of your own, recounting how the Lord has guided in your life and what Jesus means to you.

Read "God's Presence a Reality" in *Testimonies*, vol. 5, pp. 651-654; "The Scriptures a Safeguard" in *The Great Controversy*, pp. 593-602.

The value of remembering. "The plan of salvation is glorified before us, and the thought of Calvary awakens living and sacred emotions in our hearts. Praise to God and the Lamb will be in our hearts and on our lips; for pride and self-worship cannot flourish in the soul that keeps fresh in memory the scenes of Calvary."—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 661.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How would you summarize the truths we can learn from the books of Ezra and Nehemiah? In what way can you share these truths with a neighbor, family member, or friend?
2. God's law was the basis of revival and reformation for the Israelites who returned from Babylon captivity. In what way does God's law serve as the basis of revival and reformation in your personal life? Can one experience these without following God's law?

SUMMARY: When we look behind Ezra's and Nehemiah's recital of historical facts, we see God, actively present with His people. In spite of the tendency for Israel's remnant to stray, God's eye was upon them, and His providences opened doors that enabled them to restore His worship. He graciously heard their prayers and sought to edify them through the Scriptures, His revealed will.

All systems are still "Go" in God's plan to revive, restore, and enable His present-day remnant to fulfill His redemptive plan through Jesus Christ.

There Shines a Star



Sabbath Afternoon

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Ezra 7:1-26; Dan. 9:24-27.

MEMORY TEXT: "I shall see him, but not now; I shall behold him, but not nigh; there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Scepter shall rise out of Israel" (Numbers 24:17).

KEY QUESTIONS: What is the purpose of Bible prophecy? What is its practical value for the believer?

THE CHRISTIAN'S TELESCOPE. On April 25, 1990, the space shuttle *Discovery* released the Hubble telescope to begin a 15-year study of the stars. When fully functional, this greatest of all telescopes could transmit data equivalent to a 30-volume encyclopedia in 42 minutes!

Christians also have a great telescope—the telescope of Bible prophecy, which focuses on the Star of Jacob "of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write" (John 1:45). And just as the space shuttle launched the Hubble telescope, so God chose Israel to proclaim His prophecies concerning the Messiah. As a student of Moses' law (Ezra 7:6, 10), Ezra no doubt peered through the prophetic telescope many times to discern Israel's exact role. This week we will peer through this telescope to study the prophecies that inspired the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Look for similarities between Israel's role in announcing the Messiah's first coming and the role of the Christian church in announcing His second.

PATRIARCHAL EXPECTATIONS (Gen. 3:15).

In Genesis 3:15 we find one of the earliest prophecies available to Ezra and to us.

Write in your own words the meaning of this prophecy that brought courage to the sorrowing hearts of Adam and Eve. Who would be the ultimate Seed of the woman? Rev. 12:1-5; Gal. 4:4.

“Adam and Eve stood as criminals before the righteous Judge, awaiting the sentence which transgression had incurred; but before they heard of the life of toil and sorrow which must be their portion, or of the decree that they must return to dust, they listened to words that could not fail to give them hope. Though they must suffer from the power of their mighty foe, they could look forward to final victory.”—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 66.

On his way to offer Isaac as a burnt offering, how did Abraham answer Isaac’s question about the absence of a sacrificial animal? Gen. 22:8. According to Jesus, what did Abraham see symbolized in the ram he offered in the place of Isaac? Gen. 22:13; compare John 8:56.

In the bleeding ram, dying in Isaac’s place, he understood with gratitude the reality of the future Saviour’s atoning death. “Light was shed upon the mystery of redemption, and even the angels understood more clearly the wonderful provision that God had made for man’s salvation.”—*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 155.

According to the books of Moses (which Ezra diligently taught the people) the Saviour would also be a peace giver who would rule in the royal line of Judah (Gen. 49:8-11) and a prophet who would be God’s spokesperson (Deut. 18:15-18).

The patriarchs lived by hope (Rom. 8:24, 25). They could not look back to Calvary; their prophetic telescope fixed on a Star that seemed light-years away (Heb. 11:13). As you look forward to Christ’s second coming, how can you keep your hope bright and meaningful?

LIGHT IN THE SHADOWS (Lev. 17:11, 14; John 1:29).

From his study of the books of Moses, Ezra learned that God established the sacrifices as a means to teach His people about the nature of sin and about the coming Redeemer.

What was the significance of the sacrificial blood by which the priests made atonement for sin? Lev. 17:11, 14; John 1:29; Heb. 9:13, 14.

Since the blood literally and symbolically stood for the life, shed blood represented a "life given." The sacrificial animal, as it were, laid down its life for another: substitution. But since it was "not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins" (Heb. 10:4), we know that these sacrifices foreshadowed the Saviour and His atoning death for the sins of the world (Dan. 9:24; Heb. 9:26). God forgave the patriarchs, the Israelites, and all others on the basis of their faith in the promised Redeemer.

"Sacrifices were explicitly planned by God Himself to teach this great and momentous truth, that through the blood of Christ alone there is forgiveness of sins."—*Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 107.

What did the Israelites learn during the years they lived in the wilderness? Heb. 4:1, 2. What did the sanctuary institution foreshadow? Heb. 8:4, 5; 9:24; Col. 2:13-17.

The New Testament plainly states that Israel learned the same saving gospel before the advent of the Messiah as Christians learn today. This fact points to the Israelite sanctuary of symbols and types as God's visual aid to teach His saving truths during the pre-Christian ages. The sacrifices and priestly ministry foreshadowed the Redeemer's atoning death and priestly ministration of His merits in the heavenly sanctuary. In this sense, the shadow-types were a kind of prophecy that focused the faith of the believer on the coming Saviour.

The visible symbols and rituals of the sacrificial system helped to make the truths of the gospel real. How can the saving truths of the gospel be a reality to us, who worship without a visual sacrificial system?

PROPHETIC PORTRAYALS (Isa. 53:1-12).

With the development of the monarchy and the dividing of the nation into northern and southern kingdoms came the period of the major and minor prophets. Their combined oracles compose a colorful portrait of the coming Redeemer.

According to Micah, one of the earliest prophets, where would the Messiah be born? Micah 5:2; compare Luke 2:1-11.

Isaiah, a contemporary of Micah, is called the gospel prophet because of his Messianic predictions. Summarize the roles he attributes to the Messiah. Isa. 9:6, 7.

"The names [of the Messiah] begin in the past, advance to the present, and end in the far future. They first bespeak our reverence and awe, the foundations of religious feeling. They then call forth our trust, showing Christ to us all-wise, almighty. They end by eliciting our love towards him as a protecting 'Father,' who will at last conduct us to perfect peace."—Homiletics on Isaiah 9:6, *Pulpit Commentary*, vol. 23, p. 171.

The most detailed of all Messianic portrayals is Isaiah 52:13-53:12. What two roles in the plan of salvation does this passage ascribe to the Messiah?

Isaiah 53 is referred to several times in the New Testament (Matt. 8:17; John 12:38; 1 Peter 2:23-25, etc.).

"God designs that men shall not decide from impulse, but from weight of evidence, carefully comparing scripture with scripture. Had Israel laid by their prejudice and compared written prophecy with the facts characterizing the life of Jesus, they would have perceived a beautiful harmony between the prophecies and their fulfillment in the life and ministry of the lowly Galilean."—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 458.

Ezra learned much about the coming Saviour from his study of Scripture. What does God design for you to learn from Bible prophecy, since so much of Scripture is written in this form? (See John 14:29.)

"FULLNESS OF TIME" (Ezra 7:1-26; Dan. 9:24-27).

Ezra 7 establishes the date for "the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem" as 457 B.C. (Compare Ezra 6:14.) It was not until God's people were in the closing years of their captivity that God disclosed the actual time of the Messiah's appearing in one of the most remarkable prophecies of Scripture.

What period of time did Gabriel inform Daniel would be allotted to Israel to accomplish certain objectives? Dan. 9:24. What were those objectives?

All Bible scholars are agreed that the time period of 70 weeks cannot be taken as literal time (approximately one year, four months, and two weeks). In context, a period of less than a year and one half would make no sense. Since the vision of Daniel 9 is in reality a continuation of the symbolic vision of Daniel 8 (see 9:21-23; 8:16, 17, 27), it is appropriate to apply the year-day principle that is implicit here. A day in symbolic prophecy represents a literal year (see Num. 14:34; Eze. 4:6). A period of 490 years (70 weeks x 7 days per week = 490 days = 490 years) was thus allotted to the Jews.

This could have been Israel's finest hour because it involved the coming of the long awaited, long hoped-for Messiah, who was to come through the line of Abraham, Judah, and David (Rom. 9:4, 5).

When would the Messiah make His appearance? Dan. 9:25. Review lesson 5, Thursday's lesson. What happened in A.D. 27 in Judah? Luke 3:1, 2, 15, 21, 22. How did Jesus regard this Messianic time prophecy of Daniel? Mark 1:14, 15.

What would happen to the Messiah in the midst of the last prophetic week of the prophecy? Dan. 9:26 (first part), 27; Matt. 27:50, 51.

Why was the Daniel 9 prophecy so important to the Jews at that point in their history? Why is it important to us? Are you able to explain it to someone who doesn't understand it or who has little faith in such matters?

THE SILENT YEARS (Mal. 3:1; 4:5).

Malachi prophesied either just before Nehemiah's second term as governor or shortly after his second term began.

Whom did Malachi foretell would bring a reformation in Israel to prepare for the Messiah's advent? Mal. 3:1; 4:5, 6. How were these prophecies fulfilled? Luke 1:13-17.

Chronologically, the books Ezra-Nehemiah and Malachi close the Old Testament. Approximately four centuries elapsed between them and the New Testament. During this time there developed a complex body of traditions and interpretations that obscured the truths of revelation.

A little less than 100 years after Nehemiah, the Persian Empire fell to Grecia and its king, Alexander the Great (331 B.C.). He determined to fuse the East and West through Greek civilization—a process called *hellenization*. This process caused division and confusion in Judah. The Jewish sects known as the Pharisees, Essenes, and Sadducees developed as reactions against Greek culture.

In the name of hellenization, Antiochus IV Epiphanes attempted to obliterate the Jewish faith in 168 B.C. by closing the temple and ordering the Jews to sacrifice pigs to the Greek gods Zeus and Dionysus. He also forbade circumcision and Sabbath observance. Such oppression led to armed revolt by the Hasmonaeans, better known as the Maccabeans, after Judas Maccabaeus, who took this surname when he assumed leadership of the rebellion. By 141 B.C., the Jewish state had become politically independent.

However, internal strife eventually opened the door to Roman expansion. In 63 B.C. the Roman general Pompey succeeded in conquering Judah and Jerusalem, annexing them to the Roman state. In 40 B.C. the Roman senate voted Herod ruler of Judah. With the arms of Roman legions, it took Herod ("Herod the Great") three years to suppress the Jews. Jesus was born in the closing years of this despot's reign (Matt. 2:1). Thus God would speak again to His people, not through prophet, priest, or ruler, but through His Son (Heb. 1:1, 2). For a more detailed exposition, see "The Period Between the Testaments," *SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, pp. 17-43.

What is it about Christ that attracts you to Him? How can you attract your neighbors to Him?

FURTHER STUDY: Through a study of Scripture, Ezra learned about the First Advent and Israel's role regarding it. Review the following scriptures concerning the Second Advent and the part we play regarding it: Matt. 24:5-31; 28:19, 20; Rev. 14:6-12.

Read "The Coming of a Deliverer" in *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 681-702, and the last half of "The Remnant and Its Mission" in *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, pp. 163-168.

"While the angels hold the four winds, we are to work with all our capabilities. We must bear our message without any delay. We must give evidence to the heavenly universe, and to men in this degenerate age, that our religion is a faith and a power of which Christ is the Author and His word the divine oracle. . . . There are souls ready to perish because of the theoretical errors which are prevailing, and which are calculated to counterwork the gospel message. Who will now fully consecrate themselves to become laborers together with God?"
—*Testimonies*, vol. 6, p. 21.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How would you personally answer the question in the last sentence of the above paragraph?
2. How did the prophecy in Isaiah 52:13–53:12 affect an Ethiopian official in the days of the apostles? Acts 8:26–39. Can you share with your Sabbath School class how these verses affect you?

SUMMARY: Bible prophecy gives the believer confidence that God is in control of the affairs of this earth and is working out His plan toward a glorious triumph. Rightly understood, it keeps our focus on the Saviour, our Star of hope.

Lessons for First Quarter, 1994

Sabbath School members who have not received a copy of the adult Sabbath School lessons for the first quarter of 1994 will be helped by the following outline in studying the first two lessons. The title of the series is *So Send I You*. This quarter's lessons discuss soul winning.

First Lesson: What Did Jesus Teach About Mission?

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: John 4:34-38; Luke 15:1-24.

MEMORY TEXT: "Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you" (John 20:21).

KEY THOUGHT: God has commissioned human beings to share the good news of His saving love.

Second Lesson: Who Are Christ's Disciples?

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: 1 Peter 2:5, 9; Rom. 9:24-26; 12:3-8; Heb. 8:10-13; Mark 3:31-35.

MEMORY TEXT: "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen" (Revelation 1:5, 6, RSV).

KEY THOUGHT: Christ's disciples are all those who, because they believe in Him, are willing to do whatever He asks. All have the same spiritual privileges and the same basic mission.

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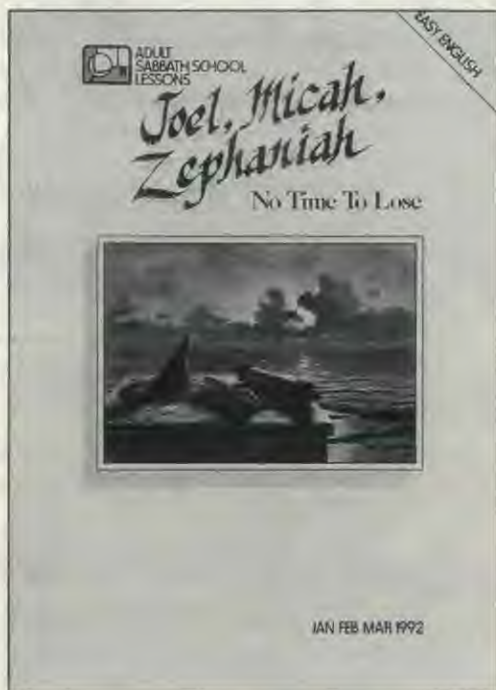
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Unions	Churches	Membership	Population
Central African	617	57,536	23,400,000
Indian Ocean	212	36,898	14,788,600
Nigeria	479	102,258	122,500,270
Rwanda	756	255,534	7,500,000
Sahel	48	7,460	65,300,000
West African	496	171,130	23,500,000
Zaire	984	249,799	37,800,000
Burundi Mission	101	34,504	5,800,000
Totals June 30, 1992	3,693	915,119	300,588,870