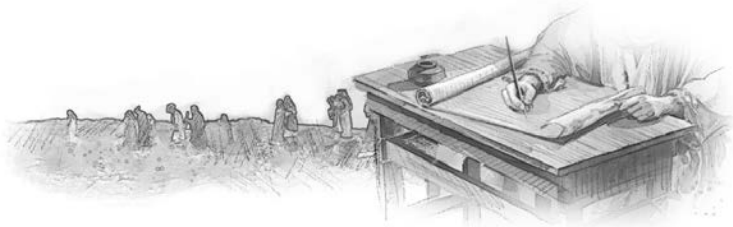


Trials, Tribulations, *and* Lists



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ezra 1:9–11; Dan. 1:1, 2; Daniel 5; Ezra 8:1–23; Deut. 30:1–6; Neh. 11:1, 2; 12:1–26.*

Memory Text: “These joined with their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse and 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 ordinances and His statutes” (*Nehemiah 10:29, NKJV*).

We usually skip genealogies and long lists of items in the Bible. But the Lord has them included there for a reason. The biblical Lord is the God of details. He notices the particulars, and this assures us that we are never forgotten by Him.

These few examples of genealogies proclaim that God knows all about our families, and the lists of things tell us that God cares even for what others might deem “insignificant.” Jesus stated that God takes care of sparrows and even counts our hairs: “Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet, not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows” (*Luke 12:6, 7, NIV*). The God who cares about these details cares about us as well, and He knows even the details of all the things that trouble us.

Thus, we can have full confidence, cultivate trust, and rest in assurance that the Lord cares about every area of our lives. While that’s comforting, as it should be, it also should tell us that we need to care about every area, as well.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 30.

The God of History

Read Ezra 1:9–11 and Daniel 1:1, 2. How do the texts in Daniel help us understand what Ezra was referring to?

Notice how in Ezra details are given, while in Daniel the big picture was presented. Together, though, these texts show that the Lord is in control.

“The history of nations speaks to us today. To every nation and to every individual God has assigned a place in His great plan. Today men and nations are being tested by the plummet in the hand of Him who makes no mistake. All are by their own choice deciding their destiny, and God is overruling all for the accomplishment of His purposes.”
—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 536.

Read Daniel 5. What do these texts teach us about the judgment upon Belshazzar?

Babylon fell in October 539 B.C., when Cyrus, king of the Medo-Persian army, conquered it. Belshazzar, falsely relying on his successes, luxury, and fame, was so arrogant that he had organized a wild banquet on the night that would end up with his being killed. The divine hand wrote on the palace wall that his days were counted and coming to an end. Even though he knew the fate and conversion story of the mighty King Nebuchadnezzar, he did not learn his lesson. It is always tragic when we do not listen to God’s warnings and do not follow His instruction.

The prophet Daniel was always there, but he had been ignored. When we lose the sense of God’s holiness and His presence in life, we tread a path accompanied with complications, problems, and tragedies, which ultimately ends in death.

After recounting to the king the story of Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel said, “But you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, although you knew all this” (Dan. 5:22, NKJV). How can we make sure that we, in our own context, don’t make the same kind of mistake that Belshazzar did? How should the reality of the Cross always keep us humble before God?

In Their Cities

Scan over the lists in Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7. What do you notice about them?

The repetition of Ezra 2 (the list of those who returned from the Babylonian captivity with Zerubbabel and Joshua) in Nehemiah 7 is deliberate. Again, these lists might seem boring to us, but they reveal an important point, which is that God cares about details that we might not care about.

The walls of Jerusalem were now finished, and the biblical text intentionally wants to demonstrate that the Ezra-Nehemiah generation of returnees were all contributing toward this great accomplishment, even though God alone gave them this success. The present generation built on the accomplishments of the previous one, even though the task was complicated, filled with barriers, and not completed as soon as they would have liked.

The leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah was valued, but the people also did their work. Each group engaged in different tasks performed at different times, but the result is impressive. The beginning (*Ezra 2*) is linked with the end (*Nehemiah 7*), and not only was the second temple built, but also Jerusalem was remodeled and well established.

Read Nehemiah 7:73. What does it teach us about how successful they were in their desire to do God's will?

“The children of Israel were in their cities.”

In many ways, the whole return and rebuilding was amazing. A people who many years before had their city devastated, their temple destroyed, and their land ravaged had now returned to that same land and that same city and were rebuilding everything, even the temple. It must have seemed miraculous to them and to those around them, as well. It was all, however, according to the will and the promises of God.

What in your life right now might seem hopeless, but nevertheless, you are still trusting in the Lord to get you through?

Where Are the Priests?

No question—as we saw yesterday, it was an amazing fulfillment of prophecy that brought the Jews back from Babylon.

But as with anything that involves humans, problems existed. And one of the big problems was that, despite all the wonderful promises of restoration after the exile, many of the Jews did not want to return to the land of their ancestors. That is, they preferred to stay in Babylon.

Why would that be?

Read Ezra 8:1–15. Focus specifically on verse 15. What was the big concern here, and why would it be a concern for someone who wanted to reestablish the nation of Israel in its former homeland?

The fact is, not all the Jews in Babylon, including some Levites, wanted to return. Several factors could have been involved. Many of them had been born and brought up in the new land, and that was all they knew. Many might not have wanted to make the long and unquestionably dangerous trip back to a land that they had never known to begin with. Eventually, though, we know that they brought along enough Levites to minister in the temple (see Thursday’s lesson), despite the challenges.

“By now, the Jews who remained in the land of exile had been there for almost a century and a half. Excavations of Nippur have brought to light numerous documents that show that many wealthy Jews lived in that region of Mesopotamia during the reign of Artaxerxes I. Hence, it may have been a difficult task for Ezra and his fellow leaders to convince as many to return as did accompany him. These returning colonists could expect only a hard pioneering life in the old homeland, with far fewer comforts than in Babylonia. In view of these considerations it is surprising to find that Ezra succeeded in persuading almost 2,000 families to cast in their lot with their brethren in the old homeland.”
—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 376.

“We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God” (*Acts 14:22, NKJV*). What does this tell us about the reality of trials and hardships for those who want to serve the Lord faithfully?

Humbled Before God

Read Deuteronomy 30:1–6. What promise was given here to the Hebrew people? What must this promise, among others like it, mean to men such as Ezra and Nehemiah?

Ezra and Nehemiah knew the prophecies. They knew that God was going to bring the people back from captivity. We saw in Nehemiah 9 that they understood their history and the reasons for their troubles. At the same time, too, they knew God’s graciousness and leading, despite their sins.

Thus, they trusted in the Lord, that He would make the return from captivity successful. Those promises, however, didn’t mean that they would not face many challenges along the way. In much of this quarter so far, we have looked at the trials and tribulations that they faced, even amid the promises of God.

Read Ezra 8:16–23. What was the challenge here, and how did they respond to it?

Despite the promises, Ezra knew just how dangerous the journey was. Thus, the fasting and the humbling before God were ways of acknowledging just how dependent they were upon the Lord for their success. At this time, with so many dangers ahead of them, the idea of asking the king for help and protection had at least occurred to Ezra. But in the end, he chose not to do that, in contrast to Nehemiah (*Neh.* 2:9), who did have an escort to protect him. Ezra obviously felt that if he had asked, it would have brought dishonor to the Lord, for he had already said to the king, “The hand of our God is upon all those for good who seek Him, but His power and His wrath are against all those who forsake Him” (*Ezra* 8:22, *NKJV*). In this case, it worked out well for them, for he later wrote (*Ezra* 8:31) that the Lord had protected them, and they made it to their destination safely.

Of course, we are to trust in God for everything. At the same time, too, what are times we do call upon even those not of our faith for help? In many cases, why is that not wrong—but perhaps even appropriate?

In the Holy City

Read Nehemiah 11:1, 2. What is going on in this passage? Why would they have to cast lots to see who would have to live in Jerusalem as opposed to living in the other cities?

What does Nehemiah 11 teach us? It was necessary to get new residents for Jerusalem from the newcomers who had come back to the land after their exile.

Apparently it was easier to live in the countryside than in the city. People had their own land, inherited from their forefathers. To abandon it and go to live in Jerusalem was a sacrifice, and many could rightly feel that they would be uprooted if they did so. Life would have new challenges, and an urban lifestyle is different from living in a rural area. Moving to a new, unknown setting is always difficult.

How challenging is it to move to a new city or country where the gospel needs to be spread? Mission to the cities requires willingness to undertake new adventures and hardships.

“Our workers are not reaching out as they should. Our leading men are not awake to the work that must be accomplished. When I think of the cities in which so little has been done, in which there are so many thousands to be warned of the soon coming of the Saviour, I feel an intensity of desire to see men and women going forth to the work in the power of the Spirit, filled with Christ’s love for perishing souls.”
—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7, p. 40.

Why is the long list of priests and Levites mentioned in Nehemiah 12:1–26? What is the connection between them and the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem described in the second part of the same chapter (*Neh. 12:27–47*)?

God wants things to be done in a proper way. Dedicated and consecrated people are needed first before great things can be accomplished. These priestly families helped Nehemiah build the walls in order that they could safely worship the living God in the temple without intervention from outside. Walls were important for security, but without devoted priests, true worship would be in jeopardy. Hence, all the people, in their various functions, had their roles to play.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Test of Discipleship,” pp. 57–65, in *Steps to Christ*.

“There are those who have known the pardoning love of Christ and who really desire to be children of God, yet they realize that their character is imperfect, their life faulty, and they are ready to doubt whether their hearts have been renewed by the Holy Spirit. To such I would say, Do not draw back in despair. We shall often have to bow down and weep at the feet of Jesus because of our shortcomings and mistakes, but we are not to be discouraged. Even if we are overcome by the enemy, we are not cast off, not forsaken and rejected of God. No; Christ is at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. . . . He desires to restore you to Himself, to see His own purity and holiness reflected in you. And if you will but yield yourself to Him, He that hath begun a good work in you will carry it forward to the day of Jesus Christ. Pray more fervently; believe more fully. As we come to distrust our own power, let us trust the power of our Redeemer, and we shall praise Him who is the health of our countenance.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 64.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Think about Daniel 2 and how Daniel, thousands of years ago, so accurately predicted the rise and fall of empires, even depicting (very accurately) the disunity of modern Europe today. How can we learn to draw comfort from this prophecy, which so powerfully shows us, even amid the chaos of the world, that God knows all that is happening and has even predicted it?
- 2 God knows all about us. This is comforting and gives us security and the assurance that we are in His care. “But now, this is what the LORD says—he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel: ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine’ ” (*Isa. 43:1, NIV*). How can you assure others of God’s presence and care when they go through emotional, relational, social, or financial crises?
- 3 Dwell more on the issue, in Wednesday’s study, of Ezra’s not wanting to call on the king for help because he was afraid that it would make his words about God’s protection seem hollow. We know, for example, that God is a healer. Does this mean, then, that we are showing a lack of faith in Him to heal us if we go to a medical doctor? Discuss this issue in class.

Teaching Russian Orphans

By ANDREW McCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

The challenge appeared enormous. Natalya Balan, the 59-year-old grandmother, wasn't sure how to make God real to the two young brothers that she had brought home from a Russian orphanage.

The boys—Daniil (age 10) and his brother, Nikita (age 9)—had suffered unspeakable abuse from their alcoholic father and later in the orphanage. Their mother was dead.

Natalya and her husband, Yakov, a retired Seventh-day Adventist pastor, took the foster children into their home in Obolensk, a small town of 4,600 people located 70 miles (115 kilometers) south of Moscow, after reading church cofounder Ellen White's appeal for every Adventist family to care for orphans. The parents prayed earnestly for God to manifest Himself in the boys' lives.

Then calamity struck. Daniil and Nikita owned a pair of old bicycles, a gift from kind neighbors, that they loved to ride. But the boys disliked taking the bicycles up the elevator to the seventh floor of their apartment building. They ignored Father's warning not to leave them on the first-floor landing, and one day the bicycles were gone. How the boys cried!

"Let's pray, and God will help," Mother said. At morning worship, Mother prayed, "Dear God, please help the boys who stole the bikes to return them." Then the boys prayed.

The town had only one school, and Mother was sure that schoolboys had taken the bicycles. With permission from the principal, she hung signs around the school, reading, "Children from this school stole two bikes belonging to two foster children. Please return the bikes."

Mother and the two boys prayed every morning and evening for three days.

Then the intercom rang, signaling that someone downstairs wished to speak with the family. A male voice said, "Come down and take the bike."

Downstairs, Mother found a stranger with an expensive, brand-new bicycle. "I saw your sign when I took my son to the first grade," he said. "My boy is too small for this bike, so I have decided to give it to you."

The big bicycle went to the older boy, Daniil. "God, thank You for such a nice bike!" he prayed that evening.



Nikita also was happy, but he wished for his own bicycle. Mother told him, "Let's pray to God." The family prayed for a bicycle for Nikita for several days.

One morning, the intercom rang again, and a male voice said, "Come down and take the bike."

Mother found another stranger with another expensive bicycle. The man also said the bicycle was too big for his first-grade son. Nikita was overjoyed! "I thank God that He answers prayers—especially my own that my children would know God," Natalya said.