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THE LOOKOUT

JANUARY 2023

Unit: Ezra

Theme: It's a New Start

Overview: The calendar frustrates us but also guides us. God carved time from out of eternity; he made days, weeks, months, seasons, and years. Surely one reason for such creativity was to give us fresh starts and new beginnings. When Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah helped bring back the exiles from Babylon, they also helped provide to them a fresh start with God. Ezra the Bible teacher led the way in reconstituting the nation of exiles. During January, students will learn of God's exciting plans for fresh starts, that fresh starts require prayer and fasting, and that they are not always easy. Students also will learn more about the distinctive lives God calls his people to live while in this world.

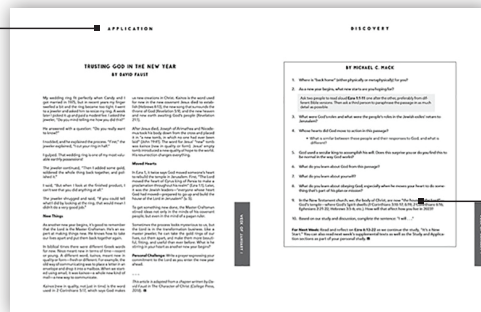
HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.



Arrows point to vertical tabs on the right side of the page, labeled 'WEEK OF JANUARY 2023'. The text says: **Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.**

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery**.



Arrows point to the 'DISCOVERY' section on the right side of the page. The text says: **Use the Discovery questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.**

WEEK OF JANUARY 15, 2023

LESSON AIM: **Though the enemies of
God press in around us, see
the hand of God at work.**

UNIT: Ezra

THEME: It's a New Start

LESSON TEXT: Ezra 4:12–5:2

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Ezra 7:6-10, 27-28; 1 Peter 1:6-7;
2 Corinthians 4:7-9, 16-18; 2 Kings 6:15-17

STUDY

IT'S NOT EASY

BY MARK SCOTT

Paul told the churches on his first missionary journey, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22, *English Standard Version*). Being a Christ follower has never been without its challenges. Jesus taught us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44), but that does not mean we will not have some. Face it—some people do not like believers.

Ezra's world was no different. God's people had returned from their exile in Babylon, had rebuilt the altar in the temple, and were laying the foundation of the temple when they ran into a buzz saw. "Enemies" reared their ugly heads (Ezra 4:1). They feigned their loyalty at first, as if they would help the Jews rebuild the temple (Ezra 4:1-3), then these enemies verbally discouraged the Jews and even tried to bribe them (Ezra 4:4-5). Then they wrote a letter to the king back east with the goal of stopping the rebuilding project. Essentially, they became tattletales. While some content of the letter (written in Aramaic, as is the whole section of Ezra 4:8–6:18) was true in terms of the rebellious nature of the Jews, the letter was written with impure motives.

The Accusation

Ezra 4:12-16

Sometimes there is truth even in unjustified criticism. Had Jerusalem been rebellious in its past? Yes! Were the exiles who had come home under Zerubbabel's leadership *restoring the walls and repairing the foundations*? Yes. Did the people who had been sent into exile 70 years previously have a *long history of sedition*? Yes.

Still, the accusation was unjustified. The letter to the king was clearly a smear campaign against the Jews. In fact, the accusers were committing a logical fallacy called "hypothesis contrary to fact." The accusers said the people would not pay taxes, which would cause the royal revenues back east to *suffer*. The accusers kissed up to the king by feigning loyalty when, in reality, all they wanted was to kill the temple project. They were most pessimistic, seen in the phrase, *you will be left with nothing in Trans-Euphrates*.

The Interruption

Ezra 4:17-24

The accusation got the king's attention. Through his officials (Rehum, Shimshai, and others), the king sent a

reply that started in typical ancient Near Eastern fashion: "*Greetings*."

The king acknowledged receiving the letter. In response, he *issued an order and a search was made* to determine Jerusalem's track record with regard to rebellion. That history was not difficult to secure. *Rebellion* and *sedition* were parts of Jerusalem's history. The king also admitted that government money had been used to help the Jews. Evidently that was as far as the king read. He immediately ordered a stop to the rebuilding project in Jerusalem. So, the work on the city was halted until the king inquired more or until he said it could go forward.

The king had listened to the accusers and felt the Jerusalem project could become a *detriment of the royal interest*. Of course, Regum and Shimshai could hardly wait to tell the Jews in Jerusalem to stop. They probably were overjoyed. They *compelled them by force to stop*.

The Vindication

Ezra 5:1-2

Amid the enemies' accusation and the work interruption because of the king's edict, God was at work to vindicate his people. Two post-exilic prophets were named leaders who would help God's people to be vindicated and win the victory. *Haggai* and *Zechariah* were prophets of the Lord helping Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah to rebuild the nation of Israel. Later, they would be assisted by another post-exilic prophet, Malachi.

These two prophets spoke God's word to *the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem*. But God himself *was over them*. God would be their vindication at the end of the day. The prophets functioned as inspired spokesmen as well as cheerleaders encouraging the people. This emboldened Zerubbabel and Joshua (son of Jozadak—not the son of Nun as in the book of Joshua) to restart the building project.

Jesus promised his followers they would be hated by the world because the world hated him. Believers should not expect an easy go of it. The accuser would like nothing more than to stop the work of Jesus in the church. But the accuser ultimately will be destroyed, and Truth—Jesus—will prevail in the end. ■

TRAVELING THE ROUGH ROAD

BY DAVID FAUST

Do the streets in your neighborhood have potholes? Freezing and thawing, excessive heat, heavy traffic, and poor maintenance create those irritating craters. But beyond the annoyance factor, potholes also are hazardous and expensive, causing accidents and damaging cars. According to a study by AAA, over a five-year period, 15 percent of American drivers sustained vehicle damage from potholes. Altogether, potholes cause an estimated \$3 billion per year in vehicle damage—not including the cost of patching the holes.

If you drive, you will travel some rough roads. And this is true in other areas of life as well. A starry-eyed bride and groom may not realize their marriage faces potholes ahead. College graduates starting new jobs will navigate bumpy roads over the course of their careers. Churches go through rough patches. So do families and friendships.

The book of Ezra tells how a group of exiled Jews traveled back to Jerusalem to rebuild God's temple, but it wasn't a smooth and easy journey. Their story reveals some principles that can help us travel rough roads of our own.

Human Opposition Doesn't Override God's Position

When the Jews arrived in Jerusalem and started building, hostile tribes nearby didn't want them to reestablish a foothold in the Holy City. "Then the peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building" (Ezra 4:4). These rival groups used bribery, political pressure, and threats of violence to intimidate the Jews, but God's will prevailed.

Delay Doesn't Have to Mean Defeat

Under pressure from the Jews' enemies, King Artaxerxes halted the construction project and for a while "the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill"

(Ezra 4:24). But as someone has said, "Waiting time isn't wasting time." The work was delayed, but ultimately it was completed according to God's timetable.

Fear Doesn't Have to Eliminate Faith

Ezra 3:3 says, "Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the Lord, both the morning and evening sacrifices." It doesn't say they had no fear, denied their fear, or even overcame their fear. "Despite their fear" they obeyed the Lord.

If you wait until you feel no fear at all, you will never drive a car or fly in an airplane. If you wait till all your anxious feelings go away, you may never change and grow. If you say, "I'm too frightened to share my faith with a friend," you will never do it. If you don't trust God's ability to provide, you will never know the joy of generous giving. If you wait till every member is carefree, your church will never pursue faith-stretching goals. If missionaries wait until every question is answered and every difficulty has been smoothed out, few will ever leave home for a foreign field.

Mountain climbers press on "despite their fear." Cancer patients undergo chemotherapy or surgery "despite their fear." Preachers proclaim difficult truths "despite their fear." Faith doesn't mean you never feel afraid. It means refusing to let fear dominate your decisions and actions. It means journeying forward despite the potholes. It means having enough confidence in God to say, "When I am afraid, I put my trust in you" (Psalm 56:3).

Personal Challenge: What rough spots are making your journey difficult right now? What opposition, delays, or fears do you need to overcome? Read Psalm 27 and watch for ways to keep going when the going gets tough. ■

DISCOVERY

BY MICHAEL C. MACK

1. In what ways have you experienced the joy of the Lord over the past week?
2. What setbacks or delays have you been dealing with lately?

Ask two people to read aloud **Ezra 4:12–5:2** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to paraphrase the passage in as much detail as possible.

3. In Ezra 4:1-11, the enemies of God's people "set out to discourage" them and "make them afraid to go on building. They bribed officials to work against them and frustrate their plans" (vv. 4-5). Finally, they wrote a letter (vv. 12-16 of our Scripture text) of accusation full of half-truths and lies against the Jews to the king in an attempt to stop the rebuilding of the temple. How does this background help you to understand what's happening in our passage?
4. How would you describe the opposition and smear campaign these enemies of God's people used against them?
5. What do you learn about human beings from our study text (Ezra 4:12–5:2)?
6. What do you learn about God?
7. Like the Israelites of Ezra's time, we will face setbacks and delays in our lives and in the work we do for and with God. What can you learn from them about God's timing, waiting on him, and trusting him in the process?
8. As Christ followers, we, like the Israelites, will meet with opposition from the world. Jesus told his disciples he was sending them out "like sheep among wolves" (Matthew 10:16; cf. vv. 17-42). Another time, he warned, "In this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33). In what ways do people struggle to follow and obey Jesus because of this?
9. While we will have trouble in this world as Jesus followers, Jesus encourages us to "take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). How can Jesus' promises and encouragement (e.g., Matthew 10:26-32) help you to serve him boldly even when you face opposition?
10. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Ezra 7:6; 8:21-32; 10:1-6**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study. 