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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.

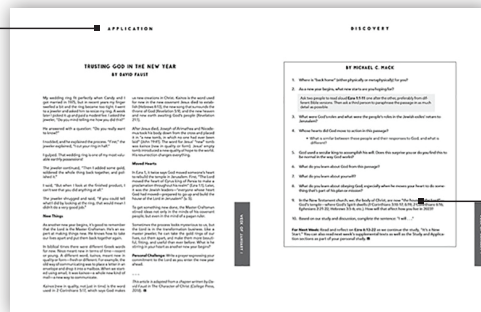
HOW TO USE

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



Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.

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



Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

WEEK OF JANUARY 22, 2023

LESSON AIM: Experience the protective hand of God through humility, prayer, and fasting.

UNIT: Ezra

THEME: It's a New Start

LESSON TEXT: Ezra 7:6; 8:21-32; 10:1-6

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Ezra 7:27-28; Nehemiah 1:3-6; Isaiah 58;
Matthew 6:16-18

STUDY

IT REQUIRES PRAYER AND FASTING

BY MARK SCOTT

New starts require sacrifice. This is true for diets, training for a marathon, or preparing for a concert. Anything of significance requires effort. Rebuilding walls requires brick and mortar. But rebuilding lives requires humility, commitment, and earnestness. Once work on the temple altar and temple itself were completed, it was time to get the exiles' lives in order. Ezra the great Bible teacher led the way in this through prayer and fasting.

Divine anthropomorphism is attributing human qualities to God. Since God is Spirit (John 4:24) he would not technically have hands, feet, back, fingers, etc. But we can still speak of such things through the quality of anthropomorphism. In the printed lesson text, God's *hand* is mentioned three times. His hand is one of provision (taking care of the exiles' needs) and protection (ensuring that they arrive safely back in the land of Canaan).

Humility

Ezra 7:6; 8:21-23

We do not naturally drift toward humility in this age of "selfies." Humility comes only through self-denial—and it must start at the top. After finally arriving in Jerusalem, Ezra led the way in humbling himself before God. Ezra led the second wave of people returning from Babylon. The text noted that Ezra was a *teacher well versed* (ready, prompt, skilled) *in the Law of Moses*. The prophet, in fact, "had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord" (Ezra 7:10). He no doubt worked at it because he realized the Law was *given* to the people by God. What a gift!

The king granted his favor to Ezra on this journey, but this was due to the providential hand of God being upon him more than just the king acting independently from God. In fact, the king gave Ezra everything the scribe requested.

To spiritually prepare the people for the journey, Ezra *proclaimed a fast* by the *Ahava Canal*. This canal was evidently a tributary to the Euphrates River. The purpose of the fast (i.e., abstaining from food for a spiritual purpose or discernment) was to request safe passage to Canaan. Fasting created the context for humility (to look down or browbeat). Ezra was so humble he did not want to ask the king for special provisions against potential enemy attacks. He wanted to depend totally on God and lean into his provisions. The Lord answered his prayer.

Commitment

Ezra 8:24-32

The phrase, "Put your money where your mouth is," applies to this section of text. Ezra *set apart* (divided or separated) twelve of the leading priests (two are named, *Sherebiah* and *Hashabiah*) from each of the tribes of Israel to receive *articles* (vessels or equipment) of *silver and gold* from the king and his helpers to go with the exiles back home. They were not to squander or be careless with these articles. They made a commitment to deliver the goods. And these articles were not small—650 talents of silver, 100 talents of gold, 20 bowls of gold, and two articles of polished bronze. The exiles had to prove themselves worthy of transporting such things.

This may be why Ezra *consecrated* (to make holy) the articles as well as the people. The silver and gold came from their Jewish *ancestors* before Nebuchadnezzar stole them. The people were to *guard them carefully* until they arrived in Jerusalem and the items were laid out before the people and priests already there.

This commitment carried them from the *Ahava Canal* to *Jerusalem*. God's hand protected them from *enemies and bandits* (those who would ambush) in their journey. Once they arrived in Jerusalem, they rested *three days* (one of many three-day references in the Bible).

Earnestness

Ezra 10:1-6

Humility and commitment cannot be embraced with a cold heart; rather, they require earnestness. For Ezra, it was not a mere intellectual exercise. Ezra was all-in. The prayer in Ezra 9 proved that. Now, a chapter later, Ezra prayed, confessed, wept, and threw himself down before the temple in front of the Israelites. This was emotional and public. When the people saw Ezra's contrition, they followed his example by weeping bitterly.

One of the leaders (Shekariah) stepped forward and acknowledged that Israel had sinned by *marrying foreign women*. He believed God might forgive his people provided they put away these foreign women and their children. This certainly took some earnestness on his part. He requested a *covenant* be made. He promised his support to Ezra, so the Bible teacher secluded himself to fast (without even water) and pray about what to do. He would later perform a mass divorce. A good thing? At least he prayed and fasted about it. ■

APPLICATION

GIVE IT UP

BY DAVID FAUST

Why isn't fasting more common in the American church? The Bible mentions it at least 60 times. Moses and Jesus both fasted for 40 days in the wilderness (Exodus 34:28; Matthew 4:2). Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther fasted. So did David, John the Baptist, and Paul. Biblical believers fasted when they repented of sin, grieved significant losses, faced national or personal emergencies, and wrestled with major decisions. They prayed and fasted before sending out missionaries or appointing elders (Acts 13:1-3; 14:23).

Done with wrong motives, fasting leads to self-righteousness (Matthew 6:16-18; Luke 18:12), and some people misuse it as a legalistic requirement or a measure of spiritual superiority (Colossians 2:20-23). But when it's done in a healthy way and for the right reasons, fasting encourages simplicity and contentment, increases our compassion for the needy, and brings our priorities into focus by reminding us we don't live by bread alone.

To be honest, I struggle with fasting mainly because it makes me uncomfortable! Giving up food makes my stomach growl, my head hurt, and my attitude cranky. The truth is, though, there are things more difficult to give up than food. It's harder to give up our pride than it is to skip lunch. Why do we resist fasting? Because for the Lord's sake, fasting requires us to alter our schedules, shift our habits, give up control, and change our attitudes. In other words . . .

It's Not About Food . . . It's About Surrender!

What does surrender look like? It's Joshua recognizing the Israelites' fickleness and their propensity to drift from God, yet having the courage to declare, "No matter what anyone else does, my family and I will serve the Lord." It's David confronting his own sin head-on and begging

God, "Create in me a pure heart and restore the joy of my salvation so I can teach others about you." It's Isaiah, humbled and awestruck in God's presence, crying out, "Here am I, send me!" It's Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego facing the fiery furnace while insisting, "God is able to save us, but whether he does so or not, our faith will not waver." It's Esther summoning the courage to confront the king, believing she had been given a noble position "for such a time as this." It's Habakkuk declaring, "Even if the crops fail and nothing else goes right, I will rejoice in the Lord."

What does surrender look like? It's Peter watching with dismay as would-be disciples drift away, turning to Jesus and saying, "Where else can we go, Lord? You alone have the words of life." It's Martha grieving her brother's death but confessing her faith that Jesus is the Messiah. Surrender looks like Jesus himself experiencing the agony of Gethsemane and facing the misery of Golgotha, kneeling before the Father and praying, "Not my will, but yours be done." It's the businesswoman Lydia having an open heart to receive the gospel and be baptized, then graciously welcoming the apostles into her home. It's Paul saying, "I have been crucified with Christ, so my life is all about him—not me."

Saying no to ourselves creates more space for us to say yes to the Lord. The purpose of fasting isn't mainly to give up food or some other pleasure. It's to give ourselves up as living sacrifices, "holy and pleasing to God" (Romans 12:1).

Personal Challenge: This week, spend all or part of a day in fasting. If this practice is new to you, start small by forgoing one or two meals and drinking liquids only. Take the time you normally would spend preparing and eating food and instead, use it for prayer. **L**

DISCOVERY

BY MICHAEL C. MACK

1. What spiritual practices (Bible reading, prayer, personal worship, fasting, etc.) have been a part of your relationship with God and growing in your faith, and which have helped you the most?

Ask two people to read aloud **Ezra 7:6; 8:21-32; 10:1-6** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions.

As a group, look through these passages again, looking for and discussing how the following parts of the story flow and work together: (a) Ezra's character and virtues, (b) Ezra's actions, (c) God's responses, and (d) the people's virtues and actions.

2. How is the "hand of the Lord" (mentioned three times in these passages) involved in the people's journey and other developments in these passages?
3. What leadership traits do you see in Ezra?
4. What do you learn about God from these passages?
5. What do you learn about yourself?
6. Throughout these passages there are at least 12 virtues and practices, both of Ezra and the people: (a) devotion to God's Word, (b) humility, (c) fasting, (d) prayer, (e) dependence on God, (f) confession, (g) mourning over unfaithfulness, (h) repentance, (i) hope, (j) surrender, (k) submission to God, (l) and commitment to God. Discuss these and how Ezra and the people lived them out. (*You may want to write these on a board or large piece of paper.*)
7. How do these all work together to help form a person spiritually? (How are they dependent on one another?)
 - Note two other practices mentioned: community (see 10:1, for instance) and solitude, 10:6). How can a balance of both help a person grow spiritually?
8. Which of these virtues and practices will you start or recommit to?
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."
10. In what area of your life or ministry are you seeking for the hand of the Lord to be on you?

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Ezra 9:1-15; 10:10-12**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study. **L**