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THE LOOKOUT

JANUARY 2023

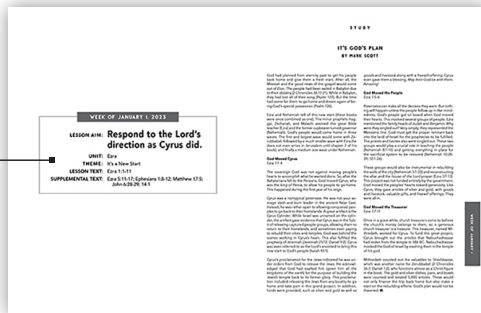
Unit: Ezra

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.

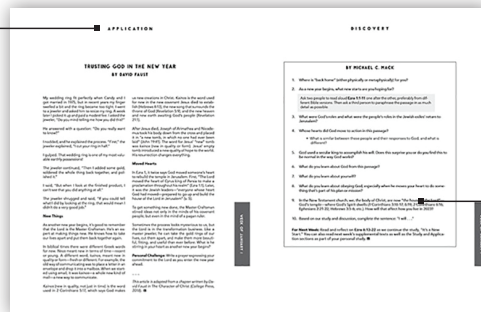
HOW TO USE

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: **Arrows 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 29, 2023

LESSON AIM: **Be distinct, and
separate yourself
from worldly habits.**

UNIT: Ezra

THEME: It's a New Start

LESSON TEXT: Ezra 9:1-15; 10:10-12

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Exodus 34:15-16; 2 Corinthians 6:14-18;
1 Peter 1:14-15; 4:1-11

IT'S ABOUT DISTINCTION

BY MARK SCOTT

The Old and New Testaments refer to God's family as his "treasured possession" and his "special possession" (Exodus 19:5; 1 Peter 2:9; cf. Titus 2:14). The point is, God's people are distinct from all other people groups. God evidently wanted it that way. Separation sometimes is the best method of inclusion. God said more than once to "come out from among them" (see Isaiah 52:11; 2 Corinthians 6:17). The proverb of being "in the world but not of the world" still holds true.

Two of the most gut-wrenching prayers in the Old Testament are in Ezra 9 and Daniel 9. In both cases the scribe and prophet pour out their souls to God. They emotionally own their nation's sins and include themselves as leaders in need of forgiveness. Upon his arrival in Jerusalem in chapter 7, Ezra sized things up rather quickly. The exiles were in danger of turning back to the sinful ways that had caused them to go into captivity in the first place. Ezra was committed to nip that mindset in the bud.

Separation*Ezra 9:1-2*

Ezra's sorrow came after meeting the leaders of the people. These leaders came to Ezra and told him that *the priests and the Levites* had not kept their distinction from the "ites" of the land (*Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites*, etc.). Intermarriage had given rise to *detestable practices* (abominations) of the pagan peoples. It was one thing for the people to have intermarried with idol worshipers, but the *leaders and officials had led the way in this unfaithfulness* (trespass or falsehood).

This might not seem so bad at first pass. After all, the Bible gives examples of intermarriages working out; some even are part of the messianic genealogy (Ruth 4; Matthew 1). But those are the exceptions. The purity of the messianic line was at stake, to say nothing of the priests and Levites who were to serve in the temple.

Contrition*Ezra 9:3-7*

This situation caused Ezra great pain. It caused him to go through several spiritual gymnastics—such as tearing his clothing, pulling out his hair and beard, and sitting down *appalled* (desolate or destroyed). He kept that posture *until the evening sacrifice* (which was again taking place, as before the exile). At that time, he assumed his prayer posture and poured out his heart to God.

He admitted to God his shame and disgrace at the deplorable condition of his people. He was so moved he would not even lift up his face to the heavens as he prayed (a rather typical Jewish posture for prayer). He admitted his *guilt* and the guilt of his people. He acknowledged that the recent captivity was due to such unfaithfulness.

Protection*Ezra 9:8-9*

After confessing his sins, Ezra leaned into the grace of God and pleaded for his protection. Ezra was thankful for many things: the *remnant* (those who had escaped death) to keep the messianic line alive, a *firm place in his sanctuary* (a return to offering sacrifices in the temple), enlightenment for their eyes, and relief from their *bondage* (servitude or slavery).

Ezra knew that God had not forsaken them (cf. Hebrews 13:5) and had shown them *kindness* (steadfast love) from the *kings of Persia*. In allowing the people to rebuild Jerusalem, God had put a hedge of *protection* (the word for protection means hedge or wall) around them.

Pollution*Ezra 9:10-15*

But even with God's protection, there was still a need for Ezra to confess that the people had *forsaken the commands* of God. The peoples who had lived previously in the land had *polluted* it (made it filthy as in unclean) by their idolatry. By intermarrying with those people, Israel had ended up *polluting* themselves. It was a clear case of guilt by association. Any friendship with the people would compromise faith. God wanted his people to be strong and eat the fruit of the land and keep it as an inheritance forever.

Even so, God had not punished them as their sins deserved. Ezra pleaded for God to have additional mercy as he acknowledged God's righteousness

Dedication*Ezra 10:10-12*

After his prayer, Ezra challenged the people to separate themselves from worldly and unholy habits. The dedication came in these words: "*You are right! We must do as you say.*" Scholars debate whether the action Ezra took was totally necessary. But it was necessary for God's people to separate themselves from sinful behavior. ■

WHAT MAKES YOU DIFFERENT?

BY DAVID FAUST

If you live in a northern climate as I do, winter means shoveling snow and navigating icy roads, so it's easy to forget that snowflakes are a marvel of creation. Those billions of individual snowflakes piling up on your sidewalk all have unique star-like patterns, which under a microscope look like Christmas decorations.

People are unique, too. We are "fearfully and wonderfully made"—"woven together" by the fingers of God (Psalm 139:13-15); and that's a fitting way to describe it because DNA is woven together in a spiral shape like a twisted ladder. Our genes vary by only about 0.025 percent across all humans, but those tiny differences shape who we are.

Sin has distorted God's image in us, but when our covenant relationship with the Creator is restored through Christ, he calls us to be different—"to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:24).

Spiritual Differences

The Israelites were supposed to be a holy people, distinct from others who lived around them. No work on the Sabbath day. No graven images. No ham sandwiches, clam bakes, or oyster dinners. God wanted more than surface obedience, though. He said, "These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts" (Deuteronomy 6:6). Sadly, the Israelites often disobeyed God's rules—or they obeyed, but their hearts weren't in it.

A messy situation arose in Ezra 9 and 10 because some leaders of the Israelites had disobeyed God's rule against intermarriage with pagan tribes. To deal with the problem, Ezra gathered a group of faithful leaders "who trembled at the words of the God of Israel" (Ezra 9:4). If Ezra and his friends were shocked by Israel's unfaithfulness, imagine how astonished they would be in 2023. How many people today trem-

ble at the words of God? Do we who wear the name *Christian* demonstrate a distinctive love for God and others? Do our lifestyles reflect God's holiness?

What Makes You Distinct?

According to Jesus, genuine holiness can't be measured by outward appearances. It's a matter of the heart.

When we follow Christ, *our identity changes*. The world no longer squeezes us into its mold. We are new creations (2 Corinthians 5:17). Political affiliations and social categories don't define us. We belong to God's family where "there is no Gentile or Jew . . . slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all" (Colossians 3:11).

When we follow Christ, *our priorities change*. His will becomes our guide—not the shifting sands of what we feel or prefer. We no longer cling to money, power, position, and status. We are free to hold our possessions loosely and serve others freely.

When we follow Christ, *our destiny changes*. Resurrection hope allows us to relax about the future, believing that "to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21).

In many ways, Christians are just like everyone else. But when we follow Jesus, we embrace a unique challenge: "Don't lazily slip back into those old grooves of evil, doing just what you feel like doing. You didn't know any better then; you do now. As obedient children, let yourselves be pulled into a way of life shaped by God's life, a life energetic and blazing with holiness" (1 Peter 1:14-15, *The Message*).

Personal Challenge: How does following Jesus impact your daily life? This week, how will God's kingdom priorities shape your attitude, decisions, spending, and interactions with others? ■

DISCOVERY

BY MICHAEL C. MACK

1. Did you begin any new spiritual practices or start developing any Christian virtues over the last week? If so, what did you start (or restart)?

Ask two people to read aloud **Ezra 9:1-15; 10:10-12** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to paraphrase these passages in two minutes or less.

2. What was the fundamental issue with which some of the leaders (in 9:1) and Ezra were dealing?
3. How would you characterize Ezra's response to this? (*Look at both his actions and the adjectives used in 9:3-6.*)
4. Some of the people joined him in his lament. How does the way they are described—as "everyone who trembled at the words of God"—say about them?
5. Where do you see mercy and grace in these passages?
 - Where do you see ownership and responsibility for the sinfulness of the people?
6. What do you learn about God from these passages?
 - What do you learn about people?
7. The New Testament calls the follower of Jesus to be distinct as a "new creation" in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). We are not to live according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit (Romans 8:4-12; Galatians 5:13-17), and we are not to conform to the pattern of the world but be transformed by the renewing of our mind (Romans 12:2). What values and priorities should be different between us and the non-Christians around us?
8. What are some specific things we can do to be distinct in our practices and priorities and yet answer God's call to be light, witnesses for Christ, and ambassadors of Christ to the non-Christians in our spheres of influence?
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."
10. In what ways do you need God's help as you seek to honor him and do his will this week?

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Nehemiah 1:11–2:8** as we begin a new unit on Nehemiah titled, "It's About Courage." You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study. ■