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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.

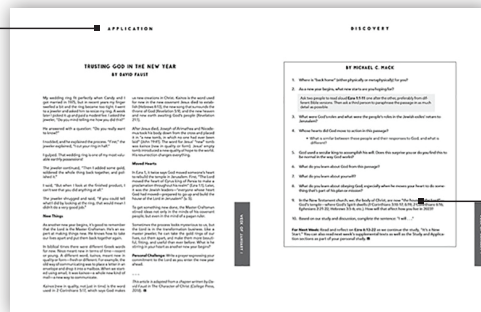
HOW TO USE

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 8, 2023

LESSON AIM: Like Israel, make your
worship fresh with new
offerings and excitement.

UNIT: Ezra

THEME: It's a New Start

LESSON TEXT: Ezra 6:13-22

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Ezra 3:1-13; Psalm 66:13-20; Hebrews 12:18-29;
Revelation 15:1-4

STUDY

IT'S EXCITING

BY MARK SCOTT

"Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life" (Proverbs 13:12). By this point in the book of Ezra, God's people had their hope deferred. They came back from captivity with such high hopes. Pagan governments had befriended them (chapter 1). Priests, Levites, gatekeepers, and temple servants were all in place (chapter 2). Reconstruction of the temple altar and the temple itself had begun (chapter 3). But then the wheels fell off. Adversaries rose up against the rebuilding efforts, letters of accusation were written against the leaders, and work on the temple ceased (chapter 4). Hope was deferred.

But the providential hand of God and the providential eye of God were on his people (Ezra 5:5; 7:6). God worked through government leaders, archivists, prophets, and even enemies to get the rebuilding project back on track. Israel was allowed to start over. Once Cyrus's decree was found in the archives, the new world leader, Darius, ensured that the temple restoration could be completed. In fact, he provided government funds, told adversaries not to bother the builders, and promised punishment for anyone who interrupted the project (Ezra 6:2, 4, 6, 11-12). At this juncture of the book, "happy days are here again."

The Completed Temple

Ezra 6:13-18

The adversaries, *Tattenai* and *Shethar-Bozenai*, had to eat crow. They had opposed the temple's rebuilding from the beginning. Now Darius made them see to it that the temple was completed. It must have been like Haman leading Mordecai through the streets yelling, "This is the man the king desires to honor" (Esther 6:9, author's paraphrase). That had to hurt even though they *carried it out with diligence*.

The post-exilic prophets Haggai and Zechariah assisted in this effort through their preaching. They delivered God's will to the people and no doubt also cheered them on. The temple was "mostly" completed by God's command and the decrees from the three top government leaders (Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes). It was "mostly" completed because there would remain work for Nehemiah to do later when he arrived. But it was far enough along for the people to rejoice and use. The

date of completion was the third day of Adar during Darius's sixth year.

Upon its completion, the temple was celebrated and dedicated. Leadership and laity participated in the celebration. The dedication, of course, involved animal sacrifices—100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and 12 special goats—one for each of the tribes of Israel. While this was impressive, it fell way short of the temple's original dedication (1 Kings 8:5). Priests were installed according to the divisions King David had originally set up, and the Levites took their places of service just as it was commanded in the *Book of Moses*.

The Celebrated Passover

Ezra 6:19-22

An interesting linguistic phenomenon takes place at this point in the book. The language switches back to the Hebrew script. The language from Ezra 4:8–6:18 was written in Aramaic. The change probably had to do with the letter that was originally written (Ezra 4:7). But since they were about to celebrate the Passover in this text, they returned to "the ancient order of things."

It was the *fourteenth day of the first month that the exiles celebrated [kept] the Passover*. All the proper protocols were followed. The priests and Levites *had purified* (purged or cleansed) themselves and therefore could function as mediators of sorts. The Passover lamb was *slaughtered* for the leadership and the laity. The exiles ate it along with *all who had separated themselves from the unclean practices of their Gentile neighbors*. This fits with what happened in the original exodus. In this we see the wide embrace of God. Others can participate in such things provided they do not try to come in on their own terms.

The celebration lasted seven days and coincided with the *Festival of Unleavened Bread*, which would be observed even up to the time of Jesus. Joy was the dominant note among the exiles. It was not just humanly contrived joy. God gave them this joy by *changing the attitude of the King of Assyria*. In the end, God directs the affairs of humans. But he does so for the glory of his own name. It was his house, and he wanted it dedicated and celebrated. This excitement would be challenged, but in this moment it was pure joy. ■

APPLICATION

CELEBRATE THE WINS

BY DAVID FAUST

As a lifelong baseball fan, I enjoyed meeting Carl Erskine, the great pitcher for the Brooklyn Dodgers. Now in his mid-90s, Erskine lives in his hometown of Anderson, Indiana. During his 11-year career in Major League Baseball, he threw two no-hitters and pitched in 11 World Series games, all against the New York Yankees.

When I asked, “What memory stands out most?” he replied, “I struck out Mickey Mantle four times in one game.”

It’s true. In Game 3 of the 1953 World Series, he set a new Series record by fanning 14 batters, including Mantle’s four strikeouts.

He tore a muscle in his shoulder during his first start on a cold day in Chicago in 1948, and as a result, he pitched his entire career with a sore arm. He retired from baseball in 1959 at age 32. A year later, his son Jimmy was born—with Down syndrome. Carl and his wife, Betty, quietly raised Jimmy along with their other three children, and they became champions of human rights, fighting to make life better for people with disabilities and their families.

Last summer a film documentary was released called *The Carl Erskine Story*. It tells how Carl broke down barriers as a friend and teammate of Jackie Robinson and a vigorous supporter of the Special Olympics. His off-field accomplishments eclipse his 122 victories as a pitcher.

In life, as in sports, it’s important to stop and give thanks when things go well. Before we rush ahead and move on to the next event or activity, we should pause and celebrate the wins. After the Jews rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem, they “celebrated the dedication of the house of God with joy” (Ezra 6:16). Later, they spent an entire week celebrating the Passover. “For seven days they celebrated with joy the Festival of Unleavened Bread, because the Lord had filled them with joy” (v. 22).

Here are four reasons it’s important to celebrate the wins.

It Glorifies God

Did your church conclude a successful program? Pause and praise God. Did your presentation go well at school or work? Say a prayer of thanksgiving before moving on to the next project. Slow down and say, “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” (2 Corinthians 9:15).

It Encourages Your Teammates

Morale improves when people feel appreciated. Take time to thank volunteers, friends, and coworkers for their efforts. Joy multiplies—and additional workers are easier to recruit—when we celebrate God’s blessings together.

It Clarifies the Big Picture

The Jews recognized God had been at work—even “changing the attitude of the king of Assyria so that he assisted them in the work on the house of God” (Ezra 6:22). When we are harried and hurried, rushing from one activity to the next, we are less likely to see the Lord’s hand in our lives.

It Points Toward Our Ultimate Victory

Small wins remind us of the biggest win of all: Christ’s triumph over sin and death. It’s great to win baseball games and it’s noble to stand up for justice; but even the greatest human achievements pale in comparison to what the Lord has accomplished through the death and resurrection of his Son. “But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:57).

Personal Challenge: What recent “wins” can you celebrate with your family and/or your church? Thank the Lord for them right now. **L**

DISCOVERY

BY MICHAEL C. MACK

1. What project did you complete last year that you were especially excited about?
2. What area in your life are you hoping to build on with God's help this year?

Ask two people to read aloud **Ezra 6:13-22** 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. How would you describe the teamwork of the different people and groups involved in the temple-rebuilding project?
4. How would you characterize the mood of the dedication?
5. The word *joy* is used three times in this passage. Look at all three instances and describe the kind of joy the Israelites had and their reason for it?
 - What's the difference between the joy the Israelites were experiencing (a joy that came from the Lord, v. 22) and the "happiness" people often seek in this world?
6. What do you learn about God from this passage?
7. What do you learn about yourself?
8. The Israelites obediently "finished building the temple according to the command of the God of Israel" and later they "celebrated with joy . . . because the Lord had filled them with joy." How have you seen this connection between obedience and the joy of the Lord in your own life?
9. How can we, like the Israelites did (v. 21), separate ourselves from the ungodly practices of our non-Christian neighbors but still be a witness and ambassador for Christ?
10. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Ezra 4:12–5:2**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study. ■