

MARCH

DEVOTIONAL JOURNAL 2017

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God was on the elders
of the Jews, and they
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the report should reach
Darius and then an
answer be returned by
letter concerning it.

EZRA 5:5 (ESV)

COVENANT EFC

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Also available at www.cefc.org.sg and "Covenant EFC" mobile app.

MEMORY FOCUS

E Z R A & H A G G A I (E S V)

2017

JANUARY

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing...

EZRA 1:1

FEBRUARY

And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel." And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.

EZRA 3:11

MARCH

But the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews, and they did not stop them until the report should reach Darius and then an answer be returned by letter concerning it.

EZRA 5:5

APRIL

And this was their reply to us: "We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the house that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished."

EZRA 5:11

MAY

Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?

HAGGAI 1:4

JUNE

You have sown much, and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes.

HAGGAI 1:6

JULY

Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, declares the LORD. Be strong, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the LORD. Work, for I am with you, declares the LORD of hosts...

HAGGAI 2:4

AUGUST

For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.

EZRA 7:10

SEPTEMBER

I took courage, for the hand of the LORD my God was on me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.

EZRA 7:28B

OCTOBER

The hand of our God was on us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambushes by the way.

EZRA 8:31B

NOVEMBER

And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, seeing that you, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved and have given us such a remnant as this...

EZRA 9:13

DECEMBER

Arise, for it is your task, and we are with you; be strong and do it.

EZRA 10:4

FOREWORD BY SENIOR PASTORS

Vision 2028 is spurring Covenant EFC to fulfil her Intentional Disciple Making Church (IDMC) mission within the Church, in our nation and among the nations.

A local church with a national and global influence. A people with devotion, depth and destiny. God has given Acts 20:28 as a spiritual anchor for our journey towards Vision 2028.

“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” – Acts 20:28 (ESV)

At last year’s Listening Retreat, God continued to urge us to possess the following:

A Firm FOUNDATION in God

“For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations ...” – Hebrews 11:10a (ESV)

Jesus Christ is the firm foundation of Covenant EFC. Laying a firm foundation for a healthy church means seeking, knowing, loving and proclaiming Christ (Phil 3). How are you building your foundation in Christ today? Your daily devotion is the best place to start!

A Bold FAITH in God’s Faithfulness

“And without faith, it is impossible to please God because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” – Hebrews 11:6 (NIV)

A bold faith opposes doubt which slows us, opposes fear which paralyses us and opposes apathy which derails us. Bold faith in God’s faithfulness means our allegiance is unto God. Luke 6:46 says, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord’ and not do what I tell you?” There is a holy dissatisfaction with our lukewarmness, fear and apathy. Our bold faith in God will see Him restore our spiritual zeal and do far greater things beyond Vision 2028 (Psa 80). How can you be bold in your faith in Christ today? How about B.L.E.S.S.-ing those around you who have yet to know Him?

A Burning Focus Towards FRUITFULNESS for God

“... whose designer and builder is God ...” – Hebrews 11:10b (ESV)

God is the Designer and has a destiny for us! God is the Builder and has the resources! He showed us a promise in Isaiah 37:30-31, “And this shall be a sign for you: this year you shall eat what grows of itself, and in the second year what springs from that. Then in the third year sow and reap, and plant vineyards, and eat their fruit. And the surviving remnant of the house of Judah shall again take root downward and bear fruit upward.” Authentic discipleship is about people, not just programmes. Intentional Disciplemaking is about reproducing people of *A Certain Kind*, not just attending an event. In the process of making disciples, we must not lose sight of the end result of fruitfulness. Will you pray for God to make you fruitful as you abide in Him daily? Are you ready for the harvest of fruitfulness that He has promised?

This year as we “Return to Our Foundation”, Covenant EFC’s pulpit and Devotional Journal will be mostly based on the books of Ezra and Haggai. May you have a blessed year of studying, practising and teaching God’s Word (Ezr 7:10)!

In Christ,

Rev Tony Yeo and Rev Tan Kay Kiong

GUIDE TO USING THIS DEVOTIONAL JOURNAL

1 Prepare your heart in God's presence

- Select a fixed time (preferably in the morning before you begin your day) and a quiet place where you can be alone and undisturbed.
- Observe a moment of silence as you acknowledge God's presence. Centre down.
- Begin with a song of worship. Meditate on the lyrics even if you are unfamiliar with the tune. (Refer to the list of worship songs provided.)
- Ask God to open your heart to hear Him.

The English Standard Version (ESV) is the default Bible version translation unless otherwise specified.

SOMETHING TO PONDER...

Examining your life is essential in your faith journey. Your redeemed life as a disciple of Christ deserves careful examining. May you take root and bear fruit in Him!

WHAT'S NEW IN 2017?

Prayer pointers for Pastors and Staff are included every Tuesday. On each Friday, there is a prayer pointer for Lay Leaders (e.g. Board Members, Zone Mentors, CG Leaders, Assistant CG Leaders, and Ministry Leaders), to facilitate your prayer for whoever God brings to your mind at that time.

2 Allow God to S.O.A.P. you with His Word and Spirit

- **Scripture** – Take your time to meditate on the Scripture passage for the day. Pause and mull over words and phrases that stand out to you.
- **Observation** – Jot down significant insights and reflections from the passage you have read. You may use the guiding questions provided. *The “Deeper Reflection” section is to aid your contemplation of the Scripture. It is not to replace your own observation, for the Holy Spirit illuminates the Scripture to you as you seek Him earnestly.*
- **Application** – Note down a specific and practical commitment to God's Word for you. Is there a command to obey, a sin to avoid, an example to follow, or a principle to live out? Where appropriate, share your devotional entry with someone.
- **Prayer** – Bring your heartfelt response to God in prayer.

WORSHIP SONGS

MARCH – APRIL

WONDERFUL GOD

Verse 1

There is no other God like You
Who made the heavens and the earth
And fills my heart with joy unending
All I can do is give my life
Offer to You a sacrifice
Here is my heart for You unending

Bridge

All of my life, belongs to You alone
With every breath, my song will rise to You

Chorus

You are the joy of every nation
The giver of salvation
Wonderful God
You are God throughout the ages
Enthroned upon our praises
Wonderful God

Verse 2

Every morning when I rise
It is Your presence I desire
To see Your faithfulness unending
Mercy and goodness follow me
For in Your presence I am free
I put my trust in You unending

Denis Campos

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CCLI Song # 5427037

FOREVER

Verse 1

Give thanks to the Lord, our God and King
His love endures forever
For He is good, He is above all things
His love endures forever
Sing praise, sing praise

Verse 2

With a mighty hand and an outstretched arm
His love endures forever
For a life that's been reborn
His love endures forever

Pre-chorus

Sing praise, sing praise
Sing praise, sing praise

Chorus

Forever God is faithful
Forever God is strong
Forever God is with us
Forever and ever

Verse 3

From the rising to the setting sun
His love endures forever
And by the grace of God we will carry on
His love endures forever
Sing praise, sing praise
Sing praise, sing praise

Bridge

His love endures forever
His love endures forever
His love endures forever
Forever

Chris Tomlin

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CCLI Song # 3148428

BE THOU MY VISION (SLANE)

Verse 1

Be Thou my vision
O Lord of my heart
Naught be all else to me
Save that Thou art
Thou my best thought
By day or by night
Waking or sleeping
Thy presence my light

Verse 2

Be Thou my wisdom
And Thou my true Word
I ever with Thee
And Thou with me Lord
Thou my great Father
And I Thy true son
Thou in me dwelling
And I with Thee one

Verse 3

Riches I heed not
Nor man's empty praise
Thou mine inheritance
Now and always
Thou and Thou only
First in my heart
High King of heaven
My treasure Thou art

Verse 4

High King of heaven
My victory won
May I reach heaven's joys
O bright heaven's sun
Heart of my own heart
Whatever befall
Still be my vision
O Ruler of all
Still be my vision
O Ruler of all

Eleanor Henrietta Hull | Mary Elizabeth Byrne |
Tony Guerrero
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CCLI Song # 4487119

COME THOU FOUNT OF EVERY BLESSING (NETTLETON)

Verse 1

Come, Thou fount of ev'ry blessing
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace
Streams of mercy never ceasing
Call for songs of loudest praise
Teach me some melodious sonnet
Sung by flaming tongues above
Praise the mount I'm fixed upon it
Mount of Thy redeeming love

Verse 2

Here I raise mine Ebenezer
Hither by Thy help I'm come
And I hope by Thy good pleasure
Safely to arrive at home
Jesus sought me when a stranger
Wand'ring from the fold of God
He, to rescue me from danger
Interposed His precious blood

Verse 3

O to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be
Let Thy grace Lord like a fetter
Bind my wand'ring heart to Thee
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it
Prone to leave the God I love
Here's my heart, Lord take and seal it
Seal it for Thy courts above

John Wyeth | Robert Robinson
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CCLI Song # 108389

JUST AS I AM

Verse 1

Just as I am without one plea
 But that Thy blood was shed for me
 And that Thou bidst me come to Thee
 O Lamb of God, I come, I come

Verse 2

Just as I am and waiting not
 To rid my soul of one dark blot
 To Thee whose blood can cleanse each spot
 O Lamb of God, I come, I come

Chorus

I come broken to be mended
 I come wounded to be healed
 I come desperate to be rescued
 I come empty to be filled

I come guilty to be pardoned
 By the blood of Christ the Lamb
 And I'm welcomed with open arms
 Praise God, just as I am

Verse 3

Just as I am I would be lost
 But mercy and grace my freedom bought
 And now to glory in Your cross
 O Lamb of God, I come, I come

Ending

Praise God, just as I am
 Just as I am

Charlotte Elliott | David Moffitt | Sue C. Smith | Travis Cottrell | William Batchelder Bradbury
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 CCLI Song # 5635850

THE SERVANT KING

Verse 1

From heave'n You came helpless babe
 Entere'd our world Your glory veile'd
 Not to be served but to serve
 And give Your life that we might live

Chorus

This is our God the Servant King
 He calls us now to follow Him
 To bring our lives as a daily offering
 Of worship to the Servant King

Verse 2

There in the garden of tears
 My heavy load He chose to bear
 His heart with sorrow was torn
 Yet not my will but Yours He said

Verse 3

Come see His hands and His feet
 The scars that speak of sacrifice
 Hands that flung stars into space
 To cruel nails surrendered

Verse 4

So let us learn how to serve
 And in our lives enthrone Him
 Each other's needs to prefer
 For it is Christ we're serving

Graham Kendrick
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 CCLI Song # 78897

HEART OF A SERVANT

Verse 1

Standing in awe of your grace
 Setting my feet in your ways
 Entering into your presence
 To behold you face to face

Verse 2

God of all heaven and earth
 Holding me in your embrace
 Unfailing love that surrounds me
 Oh... God I stand amazed

Chorus

My Jesus, my lord
 You're the love of my life
 Wherever you go
 Wanna be by your side
 No longer I
 But Christ living in me
 Serving you for all eternity

My eyes set on you
 In this race that I run
 No longer my ways
 Let your will be done
 Make me a servant
 My heart's ever true
 Clinging to the cross
 I'll follow you
 I'll follow you

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THY WORD

Chorus

Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet
 And a light unto my path
 Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet
 And a light unto my path

Verse 1

When I feel afraid
 And I think I've lost my way
 Still You're there right beside me
 Nothing will I fear
 As long as You are near
 Please be near me to the end

Verse 2

I will not forget
 Your love for me and yet
 My heart forever is wandering
 Jesus be my guide
 And hold me to Your side
 I will love You to the end

Amy Grant | Michael W. Smith

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 CCLI Song # 14301

SPIRIT TOUCH YOUR CHURCH

Verse 1

Lord we need Your grace and mercy
 We need to pray like never before
 We need the power of Your Holy Spirit
 To open Heaven's door

Chorus

Spirit touch Your church
 Stir the hearts of men
 Revive us, Lord
 With Your passion once again
 I want to care for others
 Like Jesus cares for me
 Let Your rain fall upon me
 Let Your rain fall upon me

Verse 2

Lord we humbly come before You
 We don't deserve of You what we ask
 But we yearn to see Your glory
 Restore this dying land

Ending

Let Your rain fall upon me

Kim Bollinger

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CCLI Song # 451861

THE LION AND THE LAMB

Verse 1

He's coming on the clouds
 Kings and kingdoms will bow down
 And every chain will break
 As broken hearts declare His praise
 For who can stop the Lord almighty

Chorus

Our God is the Lion
 The Lion of Judah
 He's roaring with power
 And fighting our battles
 And every knee will bow before Him
 Our God is the Lamb
 The Lamb that was slain
 For the sins of the world
 His blood breaks the chains
 And every knee will bow before the Lion and the Lamb
 Oh every knee will bow before the Lion and the Lamb

Verse 2

So open up the gates
 Make way before the King of kings
 Our God who comes to save
 Is here to set the captives free
 For who can stop the Lord almighty

Bridge

Who can stop the Lord almighty
 Who can stop the Lord almighty

Brenton Brown | Brian Johnson | Leeland Mooring

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CCLI Song # 7038281

THE CHURCH BEYOND

PRAY FOR MONGOLIA

“For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations.”
— ISAIAH 61:11 (ESV)

When Mongolia began to open up to the world in 1990s, there were only 10 known Christians. In 2012, there were approximately 50,000 Christians and 400 churches. Mongolian churches are growing rapidly, but only 1.7% of the population are Christians — many of them are young people and first-generation Christians.

Praise God:

- For the religious freedom and the spread of Christianity
- That Mongolia’s first rulers were open to Christianity and allowed religious freedom to exist



Pray:

- For God to continue to grant religious freedom in Mongolia
- For the harvest of Christians of all ages, not just the young
- For the training of church leaders. Most churches especially those in remote rural areas are in critical need of biblically astute leaders
- For Covenant EFC (working jointly with Campus Crusade) to spread the Gospel, and for the workers amongst nomadic Mongolians to have many divine appointments

WEDNESDAY, 1 MARCH 2017

Roots and Wings

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 2:2-35; Genesis 12:1-3

OBSERVATION

What is the significance of the returned exiles identifying themselves as “sons” of their ancestors (vv.2-20) and by localities in the province of Judah (vv.1, 21-35) (with Gen 12:1-3)?

Deeper Reflection

Ezra 2 shows the theological “roots and wings” orientation of God’s covenant people. **Roots in the past:** Ezra 2 is “rich with echoes of Israel’s earlier history and a deep sense of continuity and nationhood which the exile had failed to quench”¹. The returnees identified themselves as “sons of” their ancestors (vv.3-20) and by localities (vv.21-35). In exile, they “retained their memories of their homes”², and now they “returned each to his city” (v.1). Each of us in our spiritual pilgrimage has our spiritual roots and heritage which we must remember, appreciate and be grateful to God for. But sadly, we may fail to do so because of our past negative church experiences. **Wings for the future:** The people (vv.2-20) and the places which they returned to (vv.21-35) indicate that God continues to fulfil His covenant promises of the seed (people) and the land (places) to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3) despite the exile. The seed and the land in the return might be small in size, but they had the wings of God’s promises to fly in “hope” towards the “future” (Jer 29:10-11). In “Bethlehem” (v.21), “among the returnees may have been the ancestors of Jesus”³ (Mic 5:2; Matt 2:4-6). It’s all about God’s covenant faithfulness.

APPLICATION

What are the roots in the past that you ought to value, and the wings into the future that you want to fly with in your spiritual pilgrimage?

PRAYER

Lord, I thank You for the gift of the spiritual roots and heritage that You have given to me, which You have used to grow me to where I am in my spiritual pilgrimage with You. I thank You that even the hurts and pains I have suffered from my fellow believers are part of Your sovereign process in transforming my life to be Christ-mastered and Christ-like.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

¹ Robert Fyall, *The Message of Ezra & Haggai*, The Bible Speaks Today (IVP, 2010), 47

² Edwin Yamauchi, *Ezra-Nehemiah, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 4* (Zondervan, 1988), 606

³ Edwin Yamauchi, 610

THURSDAY, 2 MARCH 2017

Devotion to Service

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 2:36-58

OBSERVATION

What is the significance of the four groups of people mentioned in verses 36 to 58 among the returned exiles?

Deeper Reflection

The list of returnees in Ezra 2 contains four groups of people identified by service in the temple: priests (vv.36-39), Levites (vv.40-42), temple servants and Solomon's servants (vv.43-58). The rebuilt temple alone by itself is incomplete without people serving in it. Temple service is a divine necessity. Of the 24 clans of priests organised by David (1 Chron 24:1-5), only four returned. Only 74 Levites returned. These "represented a faithful remnant among the Levites"⁴. The Levites served as gatekeepers, singers (vv.41-42), scribes and teachers (Neh 8:7-9). The gatekeepers' primary function was to guard the doors of the temple, to prevent unholy people from entering and "perform other menial tasks (2 Chron 31:14)"⁵. To the psalmist, to be in God's presence as "a lowly doorkeeper of the temple is preferred rather than a life of wickedness"⁶ (Psa 84:10). The "temple servants" (vv.43-54) were "descendants of foreign slaves dedicated to temple service"⁷. Why only these few, and even foreigners? True devotion to serve the Lord in the rebuilt temple flows out of desire and delight, and thus the determination to take the long rigorous journey. "Be fervent in spirit, serving the Lord" (Rom 12:11).

APPLICATION

What areas in my service to God do I need to work on with regard to fervency?

PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

⁴ Robert Fyall, 49

⁵ Edwin Yamauchi, 612

⁶ D. H. Madvig, *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible, Revised*, Vol. 2 (Zondervan, 2009), 173-74

⁷ Edwin Yamauchi, 606

Edwin Yamauchi, 615

FRIDAY, 3 MARCH 2017

Taking Consecration Seriously

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 2:59-63

OBSERVATION

What do the actions of the returned exiles in verses 59 to 63 tell us about them?

Deeper Reflection

Three families of lay Israelites and three families of priests that returned from exile were unable to give genealogical evidence that they were “of Israel” (vv.59-60) and belonged to the priesthood (vv.61-63). Such requirement “ensured separation from the impurity that might come from non-Jewish people”⁸. There was no racism here, as shown in other parts of Ezra (cf. 2:43-58; 6:21). The heart of the matter is spiritual, not sociological. The priests concerned were temporarily “considered unclean” and kept from eating the priests’ holy portion of food (vv.62-63). These returnees took pains to do such a stringent exercise. They took consecration to God seriously. Their mission of returning to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and reinstitute the worship of God was a holy mission. They were realigning themselves to the call of their redemption: to be God’s “own possession...a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exo 19:4-6). This is also our redemptive call (1 Pet 2:9-10). It is not enough that we serve God as priests, but with consecrated service through living out our consecration, as being “washed...justified...sanctified” in Christ and in the Spirit (1 Cor 6:11).

APPLICATION

How does my life show that I take consecration to God seriously?

PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for lay leaders:
To have daily spiritual renewal for deeper devotion to God

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

⁸ Gary V.Smith, *Ezra-Nehemiah, Esther*, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary (Tyndale, 2010), 35

SATURDAY, 4 MARCH 2017

Complete Before God

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 2:1-2; Nehemiah 7:5-7

OBSERVATION

What could be the significance of 12 leaders being named in verse 2 and Nehemiah 7:7 (cf. Matt 19:28)?

Deeper Reflection

The list of homecoming exiles in Ezra 2 is parallel to the list in Nehemiah 7:5-57 (compare vv.1-2; with Neh 7:6-7). There are 11 names of the leaders in verse 2, “but Nehemiah’s copy of the list preserves one more, that of Nahamani (Ezr 7:7), which has evidently dropped out of this verse in the course of copying”⁹ in the transmission of Scripture manuscripts.¹⁰ So, to the Ezra 2 list “should be added...the name of Nahamani”¹¹, making the number 12. “It can hardly be accidental that the leaders number 12”¹². The choice of 12 is representative of the 12 tribes of Israel (cf. Matt 19:28) and “the embodiment of ‘the people of Israel’ (v.2) and the corporate inheritor of the promises”¹³ of the seed and land given to Abraham. It is also “suggestive of the complete restoration”¹⁴ of the 12 tribes. But not all the 12 tribes were represented among the returnees, and the number as a whole was small. Nevertheless, to God it was complete — whatever the number and however small. There was a divine completeness in the apparent incompleteness. We find this echoed in “Not that we are adequate in ourselves...but our adequacy is from God” (2 Cor 3:5-6).

APPLICATION

What does it mean to me to know that God does not require me to have my act together in my life before I can serve Him?

PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

⁹ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (IVP, 1979), 40

¹⁰ It is called copyist error in textual criticism.

¹¹ D. J. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, The New Century Bible Commentary (Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1984), 46

¹² D. J. Clines, 46

¹³ Derek Kidner, 40

¹⁴ Mark Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (John Knox, 1992), 19

SUNDAY, 5 MARCH 2017

SCRIPTURE

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OBSERVATION

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APPLICATION

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PRAYER

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THE PAST WEEK

Review

What was my high point and my low point for the week?

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What gave me life and what drained me?

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How was the Spirit of God at work?

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Reflect

What is one key thing that God said to me this week in light of what has happened?

Respond

What is one thing I need to do in light of what God is saying?
COMMIT IN PRAYER.

FAMILY DEVOTIONAL • WEEK 1 • MARCH 2017

DOES GOD SPEAK TO ME?

God can speak to anyone He wishes to.

Scripture: 1 Samuel 3:1-10; Exodus 3:1-6

★ ACTIVITY BITE

By searching the Internet or reading books on sign language, learn to sign these common phrases: “How are you?” or “I want to be your friend”. Have fun communicating to your family and friends by signing these phrases.

★ CHAT TIME

Q1: What are some other ways of communication apart from talking or using sign language?

Q2: How does God speak to us?

Q3: Why do you think God wants to speak to His people?

★ LEARNING POINT

We read from the Bible that God has been speaking to His people since the time of Adam. He can speak in many ways — He can speak directly in words that people understand, through visible signs like a rainbow (Gen 9:12-16) or a burning bush (Exo 3:1-4), through prophets and pastors and even through a donkey (Num 22:28)! After sin broke the relationship between God and man, God has been drawing man back to Him. He wants to tell you how much He loves you. He wants to tell you what He wants to do for the world. To know what He is saying, you need to have a heart that is willing to hear, believe and obey, just like Samuel in 1 Samuel 3 who says, “Here am I Lord. Speak and I will listen.”

★ ACTION POINT

Read a passage from the Bible together with your parents. Ask them to explain what God is trying to say from that passage. Think of how you can obey what God says and encourage one another to do it during the week.

★ PRAYER POWER

(Ask your children to pray after you.)

Dear God, thank You for speaking to me. I want to hear Your voice every day. Help me obey Your Word all the time. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

MONDAY, 6 MARCH 2017

As Though It's Already Rebuilt

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 1:1-5; 2:68

OBSERVATION

Why does the narrator write that the exiles arrived “at the house of the Lord” when the temple was yet to be rebuilt (Ezr 2:68)?

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Deeper Reflection

The returning exiles’ four-month long trek from Babylon to Jerusalem began with “**arose**...to go up and rebuild the house of the LORD...in Jerusalem” (v.5), and now “they **arrived** at the house of the LORD...in Jerusalem” (Ezr 2:68). From the “arose” to the “arrived”, God was there with the homecomers, for it was God’s move according to God’s Word (vv.1-5). Judah was then “the Persian province of Yehud” which was “considerably smaller than the earlier kingdom of Judah”¹⁵. And the place they specifically arrived at was “the site of the destroyed temple”¹⁶. What the returned exiles saw before their eyes was just rubble, but it is described as “**the house of the LORD**” (Ezr 2:68) — as though it had already been rebuilt. It is looking at the present from the future. Paul looked at the fleshly, immature Corinthians (1 Cor 3:1-3), who gave him so much pastoral heartache, as “God will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:8, NIV). Paul was so confident because “God is faithful” (1 Cor 1:9). Let us look at our lives and the church, still under construction and messy, with this eschatological vision and certainty.

APPLICATION

How do I apply the principle of looking at the present from the future in my life and ministry?

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PRAYER

Glorious God, I thank You that while waiting eagerly for the glory of the children of God to be revealed at the return of Your Son,¹⁷ You have already glorified me in Christ¹⁸ with the glory that Christ wants to share with me.¹⁹ Indeed, it is a glory that the sufferings of the present time are not worthy to compare with! Help me to live from and live in this glory. Amen.



¹⁵ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Version with the Apocrypha, Third Edition* (Oxford University, 2001), 674

¹⁶ Matthew Levering, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, SCM Theological Commentary on the Bible (SCM, 2008), 49

¹⁷ Romans 8:18-21

¹⁸ Romans 8:30

¹⁹ Romans 8:17

TUESDAY, 7 MARCH 2017

Giving to God God's Way

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 2:68-69; 2 Corinthians 9:7

OBSERVATION

What should characterise our giving to God according to verses 68 to 69 and 2 Corinthians 9:7?

Deeper Reflection

The first thing the homecoming exiles did upon arriving at Jerusalem was to give in money and in kind to the work of rebuilding the temple (vv.68-69). In the parallel more detailed account in Nehemiah 7:70-72, the key word (repeated four times) is “gave”. The returnees “offered willingly” to God (v.68). When we give to God, we give “what you have purposed in your heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion” (2 Cor 9:7). Why? Because “God loves a cheerful giver”. God is more concerned about the giver than the giving. The heart that gives matters more to God than the hands that give. Does it mean then that we need not give when we feel that we are giving grudgingly and under compulsion? No. What we need is to change our attitude. We tell God honestly how we feel, and that we want to change our attitude. God does not need our giving, but we need to give to God. Giving is for the good of our hearts, because “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt 6:21). Our cheerful giving to God is according to our capacity — “according to their ability they gave” (v.69). We give “in proportion to what you have earned” (1 Cor 16:2, GNB²⁰).

APPLICATION

What do I need to change in my attitude towards giving to God?

PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for pastors and staff:
To know God's abundant grace in serving

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

²⁰ Good News Bible

WEDNESDAY, 8 MARCH 2017

Where Does Giving to God Begin?

SCRIPTURE

1 Chronicles 29:1-19

OBSERVATION

What are the recurring emphases in David's prayer (vv.11-19)?

Deeper Reflection

The homecoming exiles' giving to the work of rebuilding God's temple (Ezr 2:68-69) has its historical precedence in Israel's construction of the tabernacle (Exo 35:20-24) and in David's preparations for building God a temple to replace the tabernacle (vv.1-9). In David's time, God's people gave in great abundance (vv.3-8), to which David responded with worship to God (vv.10-19). There are two key expressions in David's prayer: **"Your hand"** (vv.12, 14, 16 – repeated four times) and **"my heart"** (v.17). In fact, the word "heart" occurs five times (vv.17-19). David recognised that their giving to God in abundance was fundamentally "from Your hand we have given You" (v.14). "Your hand" is where our giving to God begins. Giving to God never begins with our paycheck, and it is never from us. It is from God that we give to God. David's prayer is saturated with terms like "Yours", "from You" and "all things" (vv.11-12, 14-16) together with "Your hand". Giving from God's hand to God's hand is giving from "my heart". And "with a whole heart" (v.9) at that. And our giving to God can only be "We thank You, and praise Your glorious name" (v.13).

APPLICATION

What perspective on giving to God do I need to change?

PRAYER

Sovereign Creator God, riches and honour come from You, and You rule over all, and in Your hand is power and might; it lies in Your hand to make great and strengthen everyone. I thank You and praise Your glorious name. Indeed, who am I that I could give anything to You? For all things come from You, and everything that I give to You, I give from Your hand.²¹

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

²¹ 1 Chronicles 29:12-14

THURSDAY, 9 MARCH 2017

Never Too Poor to Give Generously

SCRIPTURE

2 Corinthians 8:1-5

OBSERVATION

What observations can you make about the Macedonian churches in their giving to God (vv.1-5)?

Deeper Reflection

Can we say that we don't have enough for ourselves to give to God that we should stop giving or cut our giving? The answer is we cannot, as the example of the Macedonian churches shows.

The measure of their giving: The Macedonian churches were extremely poor and were undergoing “a great ordeal of affliction” (v.2). But “their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity” (v.2, NIV). And they gave “according to their ability” — that is, in proportion to what they earned from working (cf. 1 Cor 16:2), and “beyond their ability” (v.3). In this particular giving to support their needy fellow believers in Jerusalem, they gave more than they usually did. This meant they cut in meeting their own needs, or gave sacrificially all that they had. **The manner of their giving:** Entirely on their own, they begged Paul earnestly for the privilege of sharing with their fellow believers (vv.3b-4). Their initiative “implies Paul’s reluctance to encourage” them “to contribute, since he knew of their desperate poverty”²². It is “the grace of God” that makes such giving possible (v.1). And God will give us this grace when we give ourselves to Him and walk by His will (v.5).

APPLICATION

How prepared am I to give sacrificially to God, should He lead me to do so?

PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

²² Murray J. Harris, 2 Corinthians, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 10 (Zondervan, 1976), 366

FRIDAY, 10 MARCH 2017

The God Who Became Poor

SCRIPTURE

2 Corinthians 8:6-9; Philippians 2:5-8

OBSERVATION

What does the expression about Jesus, “though He was rich, He became poor,” mean (v.9; Phil 2:5-8)?

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Deeper Reflection

The Corinthians had started a collection to support their needy fellow believers in Jerusalem. Paul now urged them to complete it with generosity (vv.6-7) through the fine example of the poor Macedonian churches (2 Cor 8:1-5). The key word in this passage on giving is “grace” (repeated four times). **Receive God’s grace:** “the grace of God that has been given” to us (2 Cor 8:1) to enable us to give (2 Cor 8:2-5). **Release God’s grace:** We release the grace of God that we have received by giving. And giving is an act of “grace” (vv.6-7). **Reflect God’s grace:** Jesus “though He was rich” in His pre-existent glory, “He became poor” (v.9) by “the act of incarnation that followed His pre-incarnate renunciation of heavenly glory”²³ (Phil 2:6-7). This divine self-emptying and self-giving climaxed at the cross (Phil 2:8). Paul’s emphasis in showing this divine poverty is “for **your** sake” and “so that **you** might become rich” — “rich in the righteousness of God”²⁴ (cf. 2 Cor 5:21). This is “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ”. Paul said to the Corinthians, “You know” this grace. But the “prosperous” and “tight-fisted”²⁵ Corinthians had yet to reflect this grace. Do you “know” this grace of the God who became poor?

APPLICATION

What does it mean to me to know the grace of the God who became poor for my sake?

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PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for lay leaders:
To serve like the self-giving Servant Lord

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

²³ Murray J. Harris, 368

²⁴ Paul Barnett, *The Message of 2 Corinthians*, The Bible Speaks Today (IVP, 1988), 144

²⁵ Paul Barnett, 145

SATURDAY, 11 MARCH 2017

“My Grace Is Sufficient for You”

SCRIPTURE

2 Corinthians 9:6-8

OBSERVATION

How does Paul describe giving in verses 6 to 8?

Deeper Reflection

When Paul talked about “scanty sowing, scanty harvest; plentiful sowing, plentiful harvest”²⁶ (v.6), and wrote “he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly”, the tight-fisted Corinthians were clearly in his mind.²⁷ And yet, Paul gave the Corinthians the assurance that “God is able to make all grace abound to you” (v.8). God is such a graciously generous God! When God makes His grace abound to us, we will have “all sufficiency in all things at all times” (v.8, ESV) with “plenty leftover to share with others” (v.8, NLT). For 20 years before I got married, I went through what I called a “financial wilderness”. For most of those years, I never had a four-figure paycheck. With the low wages, I gave to God faithfully and helped my mother in clearing her debts; but after meeting my needs, there was not much left to save. I was anxious over my financial ability to get married. One day, God asked me, “David, are all your needs met?” I said, “Yes, Lord.” Then He asked, “Do you need the money to get married now?” “No, Lord. I don’t even have a girlfriend yet.” “So?” God left it there. When I got married, God provided more than sufficiently. What I could not do for 20 years, God achieved in 20 months!

APPLICATION

What does it mean to me to live my life with God’s grace always sufficient for me?

PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

²⁶ Murray J. Harris, 376

²⁷ Paul Barnett, 153

SUNDAY, 12 MARCH 2017

SCRIPTURE

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OBSERVATION

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APPLICATION

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PRAYER

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THE PAST WEEK

Review

What was my high point and my low point for the week?

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What gave me life and what drained me?

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How was the Spirit of God at work?

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Reflect

What is one key thing that God said to me this week in light of what has happened?

Respond

What is one thing I need to do in light of what God is saying?
COMMIT IN PRAYER.

FAMILY DEVOTIONAL • WEEK 2 • MARCH 2017

CAN I WORSHIP GOD ANYWHERE?

We can worship God wherever we are because He is everywhere.

Scripture: Psalm 139:7-8; John 4:21-24

★ ACTIVITY BITE

Imagine you are in a foreign country where no one speaks your language or knows what you are saying. It is Sunday and you wish to attend a church service. How would you ask for directions to the nearest church when no one understands you? Role play this with your family.

★ CHAT TIME

- Q1: How do you feel when no one is able to help you get to a church to worship God?
- Q2: Where do you think Christians in very poor countries go to worship God when they do not have any money to build a church building?
- Q3: What do you think is the most important thing that God wants from you as an acceptable form of worship? Why?

★ LEARNING POINT

Jesus says in John 4 that to truly worship God, it must start from the heart. If you do not have the desire for God, you will not worship Him even if you attend the largest church. God wants to be with people who love Him and He will be with them wherever they are. Since God is everywhere, we can worship Him through songs, prayer, fellowship and serving others at any place. You can worship Him in your bedroom, on the bus, at school, in a park or even on the moon! But don't miss Sunday church service as it is good to worship with other Christians.

★ ACTION POINT

Think of a nearby park and list down things you can find there, such as benches, a pond, a huge tree, a flowering bush or a water fountain. Take a walk in this park. Stop whenever you spot these things and say a thanksgiving prayer or sing a song of praise to God.

★ PRAYER POWER

(Ask your children to pray after you.)

Thank You, God, for being everywhere. Now I can worship You wherever I am. You are so amazing and wonderful. We praise You! Amen.

MONDAY, 13 MARCH 2017

Theology of the Altar (1)

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 3:1-2; Genesis 12:1-7

OBSERVATION

What observations can you make in comparing verses 1 to 2 with Genesis 12:5-7?

Deeper Reflection

The exiles returned from Babylon to Jerusalem for the purpose of rebuilding the temple of God. When they arrived at Jerusalem, it was **first things first**: they “arose and built the altar” (v.2) — even before they laid the foundation of the temple (v.6). The altar was built to offer sacrifices to God, “to offer burnt offerings on it.” The altar is the place of worship and discipleship. And there can be no true worship without true discipleship. Discipleship is worship, presenting to God our whole persons as “a living and holy sacrifice” in “spiritual service of worship” (Rom 12:1). The altar of God is incomplete and meaningless without sacrifices offered on it. When Abraham reached the land God promised to give him, the first thing he did was to build “an altar there to the LORD” (Gen 12:5-7). The exiles did the same, except that they returned to the Promised Land which they had lost for their unfaithfulness. Nonetheless, in both cases, building the altar was an affirmation of their faith in **God’s covenant faithfulness**. The altar was the altar “of the God of Israel” (v.2). The altar was built in the context of God’s covenant relationship with His people.

APPLICATION

In what ways do discipleship and worship merge in my life?

PRAYER

God, when Abraham was about to sacrifice his only son, whom he loved, You substituted his son with a lamb. That lamb was Your only Son, whom You love, who offered Himself on Your altar as the unblemished sacrifice for the atonement of our sins. Now I place my life on Your altar, living my life no longer for myself, but for Him who died and rose on our behalf.²⁸

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:
- Pray for leaders:
- Pray for significant people:
- Pray for those in need:
- Pray for self:

²⁸ 2 Corinthians 5:15

TUESDAY, 14 MARCH 2017

Theology of the Altar (2)

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 3:1-3; Exodus 29:38-43

OBSERVATION

What observations can you make on the altar of burnt offering in Exodus 29:38-43?

Deeper Reflection

The returned exiles “set up the altar” and “offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD” because they were “terrified” of “the peoples of the lands” (v.3). The exiles returned to a hostile environment — to their land now inhabited by “the local Ammonites, Moabites, Edomites, and Samaritans”²⁹. The number of the Jewish immigrants was small, and without a military force to protect themselves from intruders, it would be easy to be intimidated by threats of attack.³⁰ The altar points to God’s presence with His people. It was to be placed “at the doorway of the tent of meeting before the LORD, where I will meet with you, to speak with you” (Exo 29:38, 42-43). Interestingly, David draws a parallelism between the temple of God and the altar of burnt offering (1 Chron 22:1). The access to God’s presence was promised at the altar³¹ with the continual burnt offering on it. In the exiles’ vulnerable situation, the altar was a visible sign and gave assurance of God’s protective presence.³² Christ’s offering of Himself on the altar for our redemption enables us to confidently draw near to God (Heb 4:16) who seeks to meet with us, to speak with us in Christ.

APPLICATION

What is my response to God who wants to meet with me, to speak with me?

PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for pastors and staff:
To serve God in intimate communion with Him

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

²⁹ Gary V. Smith, 38

³⁰ Gary V. Smith, 38

³¹ Derek Kidner, 51

³² Robert Fyall, 59

WEDNESDAY, 15 MARCH 2017

Gather Together as One Man

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 3:1; Ezekiel 37:15-22

OBSERVATION

What observations can you make on Ezekiel 37:15-22 in relation to the returned exiles “gathered together as one man” in Jerusalem in verse 1?

Deeper Reflection

We see the great significance of the exiles “gathered together as one man” (v.1) in Jerusalem to rebuild the temple of God, when it is viewed against Israel’s chequered history. The united kingdom of Israel under the reign of David and Solomon was divided into the northern and southern kingdoms because of Solomon’s unfaithfulness to God.³³ There had been conflict between the two kingdoms during the divided kingdom period.³⁴ Then, the northern kingdom disappeared in 722 BC, and so did the southern kingdom in 586 BC. The history of the Church of Jesus Christ marked by division is no different. But God promised through Ezekiel, against the backdrop of the Babylonian exile, that He would resurrect His spiritually dead people (Eze 37:1-14), and restore both Israel and Judah into “one in My hand” (Eze 37:15-19, 21-22). God was fulfilling His promise here, albeit this “one man” was merely a representation of Israel as a nation. God scattered His people in judgment, but now He gathered them together as one people in mercy. God can and will bring His disunited church together in unity. For in the Church is “the unity of the Spirit” (Eph 4:3) created “through the cross” (Eph 2:16).

APPLICATION

In what ways am I not relating in unity in Christ with certain fellow believers, and what will I do about this?

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, You have redeemed us to be one people of God in one body through Your blood, that we may have free access to the Father in one Spirit.³⁵ Help Your church to grow in humility and gentleness, with patience forbearing one another in love, making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Amen.³⁶

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

³³ 1 Kings 11:11-13

³⁴ E.g., 2 Chronicles 13:1-2

³⁵ Ephesians 2:16-18

³⁶ Ephesians 4:2-3

THURSDAY, 16 MARCH 2017

Offering of Sacrifices to God

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 3:2-6; Leviticus 1:2-9

OBSERVATION

What observations can you make on burnt offerings in verses 2 to 6?

Deeper Reflection

A prevailing idea in verses 2 to 6 is offerings and festivals. The burnt offering (repeated six times in vv.2-6) was an offering for atonement for sin (Lev 1:3-4) and as an expression of the dedication of the worshipper. In laying the hand on the head of the burnt offering (Lev 1:4), the worshipper was saying, “I am offering myself to God.”³⁷ The burnt offering was wholly consumed on the altar (Lev 1:8-9), with none of it eaten by the priests like other offerings (Lev 6:14-16, 29; 7:6). It was a continual offering “on the altar all night until morning, and the fire on the altar is to be kept burning on it” (Lev 6:9). The burnt offering reminds us that our dedication to God is to be total and continual. Offerings were offered daily (“morning and evening”, v.3), monthly (“for new moons”, v.5; Num 28:11), seasonal (“the fixed festivals”, v.5); and we may add, weekly (“on the Sabbath day”, Num 28:9). This gives us a sense of the breadth and depth our devotion to God ought to have. Our offerings to God include praise and thanksgiving (Heb 13:15), “doing good and sharing” (Heb 13:16), material things (Phil 4:18) and, most important of all, our lives – in all that we are, we have and we do (Rom 12:1; Phil 2:17; 2 Tim 4:6).

APPLICATION

What does it mean to me to offer to God a whole burnt offering daily and continually?

PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

³⁷ George A. F. Knight, *Leviticus*, The daily Study Bible Series (WJK, 1981), 14

FRIDAY, 17 MARCH 2017

Celebrating the Feast of Booths

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 3:4; Deuteronomy 16:13-15; Leviticus 23:34, 42-43

OBSERVATION

What do Deuteronomy 16:13-15 and Leviticus 23:34, 42-43 tell us about the Feast of Booths?

Deeper Reflection

The returned exiles celebrated the Feast of Booths (Ezra 3:4) — “the most important festival in Israel’s liturgical year”³⁸ which is celebrated over seven days (Num 29:12). In a vivid way, the feast brings together the great twin theological themes of creation and salvation. It was a festival of harvest, celebrated with booths “set up in the fields for the temporary lodging of the harvesters”³⁹. It was a time of joyful thanksgiving to God for blessing His people “in all your produce and in all the work of your hands” (Deut 16:13-15) as **the Lord of creation**. The feast was also to remind each new generation in Israel that God made their ancestors live in temporary shelters when He delivered them from the land of Egypt (Lev 23:42-43). The celebration was to affirm their faith in **the Lord of salvation**. The exiles’ celebration of the Feast of Booths marked a new beginning of Israel with the goodness of their Creator God and the grace of their Saviour God. The Feast of Booths is an assurance that the good Creator will “give us each day our daily bread” (Lk 11:3), and the gracious Saviour will “forgive us our sins” (Lk 11:4) and “deliver us from evil” (Matt 6:13).

APPLICATION

How can the theological significance of the Feast of Booths help build my faith in God?

PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:
- Pray for lay leaders:
To have an enlarged vision of the God of creation and salvation
- Pray for significant people:
- Pray for those in need:
- Pray for self:

³⁸ David J. Clines, 66

³⁹ David J. Clines, 66

SATURDAY, 18 MARCH 2017

As It Is Written

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 3:2, 4; Psalm 119:34

OBSERVATION

What do verses 2 and 4 tell us about the returnees from exile and the Word of God?

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Deeper Reflection

Upon their arrival at Jerusalem, the first thing the returnees attended to was the worship of God. And they did so according to the Word of God. They “built the altar...as it is written in the law of Moses” (v.2). They “celebrated the Feast of Booths, as it is written”, and offered the burnt offerings “according to the rules” (v.4, ESV). The threefold emphasis in two verses reflects their attitude and commitment to the Word of God. **Keeping the Word strictly:** We can be sure that in celebrating the Feast of Booths, the returnees followed the instructions given in great detail in Numbers 29:12-38 (27 verses!). The preparations and effecting of the precise instructions given would take great care and precision.⁴⁰ The antithesis of keeping the Word strictly is keeping the Word selectively. Keeping the Word strictly presupposes **knowing the Word sharply**. In Psalm 119:34, the psalmist is not asking God to help him obey His Word wholeheartedly. His request is: “Give me understanding.” The purpose of knowing the Word is keeping the Word, but knowing the Word precedes keeping the Word. Misunderstanding the Word will result in misapplying the Word.

APPLICATION

How do I want to grow in knowing God’s Word sharply and keeping God’s Word strictly?

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PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

⁴⁰ Robert Fyall, 59

SUNDAY, 19 MARCH 2017

SCRIPTURE

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OBSERVATION

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APPLICATION

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PRAYER

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THE PAST WEEK

Review

What was my high point and my low point for the week?

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What gave me life and what drained me?

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How was the Spirit of God at work?

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Reflect

What is one key thing that God said to me this week in light of what has happened?

Respond

What is one thing I need to do in light of what God is saying?
COMMIT IN PRAYER.

FAMILY DEVOTIONAL • WEEK 3 • MARCH 2017

WHY DOES GOD WANT ME TO GIVE OFFERINGS TO THE CHURCH?

Giving money to church helps it to do many good works.

Scripture: Acts 2:43-47; 2 Corinthians 9:6-7

★ ACTIVITY BITE

Talk to a church leader to find out about the types of expenses the church has every month. Write them down and highlight those items which money is used for good works such as buying groceries for poor people.

★ CHAT TIME

Q1: Why does God want the church to do good works?

Q2: Where do you think the church gets the money to pay for its expenses?

Q3: How does giving offerings to the church help it in doing more good works?

★ LEARNING POINT

Like any other building, the church has to pay for all the monthly electricity and water bills as well as other maintenance costs to keep the building in good condition. Apart from that, the church has many other projects like organising Christmas events to spread the Gospel, sending missionaries to other countries and helping the poor in the neighbourhood. The early church in the book of Acts did just that and everyone gave generously to support the work of their church. In the same way, since we are part of the church, we should give to support the work of our church. Give whatever amount you can and do it joyfully, knowing that what you give will bless someone in need.

★ ACTION POINT

Find out if your church is doing any good works or projects that will bless the poor in the coming months. Consider setting aside an amount from your weekly allowance and pass it to your pastors, indicating your wish to support these good works.

★ PRAYER POWER

(Ask your children to pray after you.)

Dear Jesus, I want to give to the good works that my church is doing. I pray that through them many people will come to believe in You. In Your name I pray. Amen.

MONDAY, 20 MARCH 2017

The Purposes of God Continue

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 3:7; 2 Chronicles 2:1-4, 15-16

OBSERVATION

What observations can you make about the task of temple building in verse 7 and 2 Chronicles 2:1-4, 15-16?

Deeper Reflection

There are elements in the returned exiles' preparations for building the Second Temple that echo Solomon's preparations for building the First Temple. The Sidonians and Tyrians "to bring cedar wood from Lebanon to the sea at Joppa" for rebuilding the temple (v.7) echoes Solomon's request to the king of Tyre (2 Chron 2:3) to send him "cedar, cypress and algum timber from Lebanon" (2 Chron 2:8) "by sea to Joppa" (2 Chron 2:16). The present "food, drink and oil" to the Sidonians and Tyrians (v.7) echoes Hiram's request for "wheat and barley, oil and wine" as provisions for his servants in the past (2 Chron 2:15). These echoed elements serve a theological purpose. They underscore **God continuing His purposes** in rebuilding the First Temple in ruins. Our past setbacks, however great, do not mean that God discontinues His purposes for our lives. It may seem to be so in those dark moments when we face setbacks, but it is not necessarily so. For out of the ruins of our lives, there can be the redemptive continuation of God's purposes for our lives as we seek Him to restore and rebuild us. The building of the Second Temple is the return of God's redemptive presence to His broken people.

APPLICATION

In what ways do I need to have the assurance of God continuing His purposes for my life?

PRAYER

Covenant Lord, You are a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, who does not forsake His people, but is patient with us in our unfaithfulness for a long time.⁴¹ We are unworthy of Your steadfast love and faithfulness, but You remain faithful. Help us not to take Your mercy and grace for granted. Amen.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:
- Pray for leaders:
- Pray for significant people:
- Pray for those in need:
- Pray for self:

⁴¹ Nehemiah 9:17, 30

TUESDAY, 21 MARCH 2017

The Lesser Is No Lesser

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 3:7; 2 Chronicles 2:1-4, 17-18

OBSERVATION

What observations can you make on the two kings involved in building the temple in verse 7 and 2 Chronicles 2:1-4, 17-18?

Deeper Reflection

We see elements in the returned exiles' preparations for building the Second Temple echoed in Solomon's preparations for building the First Temple. In the parallels there is a particular contrast. In building the First Temple, the preparations were made under the direction of the king of Israel, Solomon, personally and directly – "Solomon assigned" (2 Chron 2:2), "Solomon sent word to Hiram king of Tyre" (2 Chron 2:3) and "Solomon numbered... appointed" (2 Chron 2:17-18). The exiles returned to their homeland without a king of their own and their land was under the control of the Persians. And the preparations made for rebuilding the temple was "according to the permission they had from Cyrus king of Persia" (v.7). It would appear that the present temple building is somewhat lesser compared to the previous one. It is so easy to make this comparison: then Solomon was king of Israel and now Cyrus is king of Persia. But we must not miss what is most important and constant: over these two kings is "the God of heaven" (Ezr 1:2) and "Lord of kings" (Dan 2:47), and He is "the God of Israel" (Ezr 1:3). This theological vision enables us to see that what appears to be lesser is no lesser.

APPLICATION

In what ways do I need to change my perspectives from the human and world's mindset to God's viewpoint?

PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for pastors and staff:
To see God in big and small things

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

WEDNESDAY, 22 MARCH 2017

The Work of God's House

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 3:1-9

OBSERVATION

What observations can you make on the people of God regarding their involvement in “the work of the house of the LORD” (vv.1-9)?

Deeper Reflection

“**T**he work of the house of the LORD” (v.8) begins with **consecration**. Building the altar “to offer burnt offerings on it” (v.2) precedes laying the temple’s foundation (v.6). Consecration aligns our hearts to be theocentric in ministry. Sadly, God’s work is often marked by anthropocentricity and egotism. In the “work of” God’s house (v.8) there must be “workmen in” God’s house (v.9). In rebuilding the temple, “the work force was made up of everyone who had returned from exile” (v.8, NLT). The key word is “everyone”. And “everyone” “stood united” (v.9) in **commitment** to the work. In partnership, Zerubbabel and Jeshua made their distinctive **contribution** in giving leadership. Jeshua is mentioned before Zerubbabel in leading the ministry of worship (v.2) and the reverse in rebuilding the temple (v.8). Priests and Levites had their own contributions to make. As for the rest, “some lifted stones, some transported wood from Joppa, some baked food for the workers to eat”⁴². The word “oversee” (vv.8-9) indicates **carefulness**. Overseeing “the work” (v.8) and “the workmen” (v.9) ensures “strict attention to standards”⁴³, because it is “the work of the house **of the LORD**”.

APPLICATION

What changes do I need to make on my part regarding the work of the house of God?

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, we pray that we will speak the truth in love, and grow in every way more and more like You, who is the head of the church. Lord, You make the whole body fit together perfectly. Help each of us to be faithful in doing our God-assigned part, so as to help the other parts to grow, and that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.⁴⁴ Amen.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

⁴² Gary V. Smith, 41

⁴³ Derek Kidner, 52

⁴⁴ Ephesians 4:15-16

THURSDAY, 23 MARCH 2017

Begin and End with Worship

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 3:1-6, 10-13

OBSERVATION

How does the narrator show the theme of worship in verses 1 to 6 and verses 10 to 13?

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Deeper Reflection

Ezra chapter 3 begins and ends with worship. There is worship before the foundation of the temple was laid (vv.1-6) and when the foundation was laid (vv.10-13). The worship before laying the temple's foundation is **consecration worship** of building the altar of God, offering burnt offerings to Him and observing "all the fixed festivals of the LORD" (vv.2-5). When the temple's foundation was laid, the worship is **celebration worship** of joyful singing, praising and giving thanks to God (Ezr 3:7-13). We cannot miss worship as a prominent theme here. Consecration worship was "as it is written in the law of Moses, the man of God" (v.2) and celebration worship was "according to the directions of King David of Israel" (v.10; cf. 1 Chron 6:31-32). Following certain standards set for worship is a key feature here. There ought to be **a conscious spiritual discipline** in our worship to God. Like paying attention to ourselves in being the true worshippers that God seeks (Jn 4:23). Like preparing ourselves to "be ready" "to meet God", as God required Israel to do for two days (Exo 19:10-11, 17). It all has to do with the One we worship.

APPLICATION

What areas do I need to pay particular attention to, so as to become or grow as a true worshipper of God?

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PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

FRIDAY, 24 MARCH 2017

God's Glory in His House

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 3:10-11; 2 Chronicles 5:1-2, 7-14

OBSERVATION

What are the similarities and contrasts in the events at the Second Temple (vv.10-11) and at the First Temple (2 Chron 5:1-2, 7-14)?

Deeper Reflection

The event of laying the foundation of the Second Temple and celebration contains “conscious echoes of Solomon’s celebrations”⁴⁵ at the just completed First Temple. In both events, the Levites sang, with some similar musical instruments — “trumpets” and “cymbals”; and focused on the same theological theme: “He is good, for His steadfast love is everlasting” (v.11; 2 Chron 5:13). But there were two major contrasts: “the ark of the covenant of the LORD” (2 Chron 5:7) and the temple “filled with a cloud” — “the glory of the LORD” (2 Chron 5:13b-14), were absent at the Second Temple. In contrast to the magnificent completed temple and elaborate celebration to God, the laying of the foundation was just “some beginnings, and small beginnings at that”⁴⁶. The appearance of things looks markedly different before human eyes; but in reality, it makes no difference to God. God was enthroned upon the praises of Israel returned from exile, and “these could be as glorious as Solomon’s”⁴⁷. The returned exiles were “in conditions more conducive to humility than to pride”⁴⁸, which demanded a faith to see the glory of God when there was no visible glory.

APPLICATION

What does the glory of God mean to me?

PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for lay leaders:
To have God's glory manifested in their lives

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

⁴⁵ Derek Kidner, 53

⁴⁶ Derek Kidner, 53

⁴⁷ Derek Kidner, 53

⁴⁸ Derek Kidner, 53

SATURDAY, 25 MARCH 2017

“I Have Hope in Him”

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 3:11; Lamentations 3:19-26

OBSERVATION

What observations can you make about the steadfast love of God in comparing the post-exilic verse 11 with the exilic Lamentations 3:19-26?

Deeper Reflection

The central theological theme of the returned exiles' worship when the foundation of the temple was laid was: “He is good, for His steadfast love endures forever toward Israel” (v.11, ESV). “Steadfast love” is a covenant term. In the Old Testament, covenant, steadfast love and faithfulness frequently go together (e.g. Psa 89:1-4, 24, 28, 33-34). “His steadfast love endures forever” is significantly meaningful to the returned exiles in rebuilding the temple. We can see this in Lamentations. The poet in exile — representing Israel — saw that “the Lord has become an enemy” of His people (Lam 2:5), who rejected and abandoned His temple (Lam 2:7) and “in His anger” “determined to destroy” Jerusalem (Lam 2:1, 8). But in his immense pain, the poet saw his covenant God anew, as the God of unceasing steadfast love, unfailing compassions and unshakable faithfulness (Lam 3:21-22). In response he said, “I have hope in Him” (Lam 3:24). And he would “wait for Him silently” for His “salvation”, with the assurance that “the Lord is good” to such people (Lam 3:25-26). In suffering the 70-year exile, he clung to the hope that God will keep His covenant, despite His wrath on His unfaithful people. And God did.

APPLICATION

In what ways does understanding the Lord as a covenant God give me hope?

PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

SUNDAY, 26 MARCH 2017

SCRIPTURE

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OBSERVATION

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APPLICATION

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PRAYER

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THE PAST WEEK

Review

What was my high point and my low point for the week?

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What gave me life and what drained me?

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How was the Spirit of God at work?

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Reflect

What is one key thing that God said to me this week in light of what has happened?

Respond

What is one thing I need to do in light of what God is saying?
COMMIT IN PRAYER.

FAMILY DEVOTIONAL • WEEK 4 • MARCH 2017

WHY DO WE NEED A CHURCH BUILDING?

A building allows Christians to gather in one place to worship God.

Scripture: Luke 4:15-16; John 4:21-24

★ ACTIVITY BITE

Use the Internet to search for the word “church buildings” and look at the different shapes and sizes of churches around the world. Try to spot similarities and differences in the designs.

★ CHAT TIME

- Q1: What do you think are necessary parts of a church building?
Q2: If Jesus says we can worship God anywhere in John 4, why do we still need a church building?
Q3: How can you explain to your friends who believe that you must go to a church building to worship God, or else your prayers will not be answered?

★ LEARNING POINT

The Bible speaks about Jesus and the apostles going to synagogues to read and preach the Word of God to the believers. These synagogues are like church buildings today where people gather to worship. Though we know from John 4 that we can worship God anywhere as long as it is from our hearts, church buildings are still very useful as places for Christians to come together for the same purpose. In most countries, Christians are not allowed to gather and worship in public places apart from their own homes, which also serve as venues for training and events. We should be thankful for the building that God has given us and should use it for good purposes.

★ ACTION POINT

Brainstorm different ideas of how your church building can be used for good purposes, especially those that will bless people from the neighbourhood. Pass your list of ideas to your pastors for their consideration.

★ PRAYER POWER

(Ask your children to pray after you.)

Thank You, God, for giving us a building where we can worship freely. I pray that we will use it for good purposes so that many people can come to worship You too. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

MONDAY, 27 MARCH 2017

Just When Things Are Going Well...

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 3:10-13 and 4:1

OBSERVATION

What is the significance of the way the narrator moves from verse 13 to Ezra 4:1?

Deeper Reflection

When the foundation of the temple was laid, there was great celebrative worship of God, so much so that the sound of the returned exiles' loud shouts of joy "was heard far away" (vv.12-13). It was something like what Paul commended the church in Rome for: "your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world" (Rom 1:8). From the time of King Cyrus' decree for the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple (Ezr 1:1-4) until the foundation of the temple was laid (vv.10-13), things had been going well. Then, the climax of singing, praising and giving thanks to God with loud shouts of joy (vv.10-13) abruptly turned into an anti-climax: "Now when the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard..." (Ezr 4:1), followed by relentless attacks (Ezr 4:2-5). Don't expect things in our lives to be smooth going, safe and sound all the time, even when God in His providence is fulfilling His purposes, as seen throughout Ezra 1 to 3. When we are suddenly thrown into a "fiery ordeal", "do not be surprised...as though some strange things are happening to you" (1 Pet 4:12). Still, God "is good, for His steadfast love endures forever" (v.11). We can still "in everything give thanks" to God (1 Thess 5:18).

APPLICATION

How will I respond when things in my life change unexpectedly from good to bad?

PRAYER

From You and through You and to You are all things, O Sovereign God. You have the sovereign freedom and pleasure to give to us and to take away from us, to let good or bad things befall us. But You in Your wisdom and love cause all things to work together for good according to Your purposes to the glory of Your holy name. Amen.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

TUESDAY, 28 MARCH 2017

A Rough Journey That Will Be Long

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 4:1-24

OBSERVATION

What is the main theme in verses 1 to 24 and how does the narrator present it?

Deeper Reflection

Verses 1 to 24 are about opposition against the work of God in the post-exilic period. The chapter has an unusual chronological structure. It begins with the opposition against rebuilding the temple “all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia” (vv.1-5) and ends with “work on the house of God ceased...until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia” (v.24). Sandwiched in between is a long narrative (vv.6-23) of opposition “in the reign of Ahasuerus” (v.6) and opposition against rebuilding the city of Jerusalem “in the days of Artaxerxes” (vv.7, 23). The reigns of the four Persian kings are in this order historically: Cyrus, Darius, Ahasuerus and Artaxerxes. Ezra and Nehemiah lived during Artaxerxes’ reign (Ezr 7:1; Neh 2:1). The cease in rebuilding Jerusalem happened one century⁴⁹ after the rebuilding of the temple stopped. The time order in Ezra 4 from the perspective of rebuilding the temple is: present (vv.1-5), future (vv.6-23) and present (v.24). Verses 1 to 24 are intended to be read as one literary unit, which underscores this theological point: “From this point onwards right to the end of Nehemiah there is conflict. Nothing that is attempted for God will now go unchallenged”⁵⁰ for 100 years!

APPLICATION

How will I respond when the difficulties I face in my life and service to God seem to have no end?

PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for pastors and staff:
To persevere in walking faithfully with God
- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

⁴⁹ J. G. McConville, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther* The Daily Study Bible Series (WJK, 1985), 26; Derek Kidner, 11 – dates of events in the Persian era

⁵⁰ Derek Kidner, 53

WEDNESDAY, 29 MARCH 2017

“You Have Nothing in Common with Us”

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 4:1-3

OBSERVATION

What is the significance of the way the enemies of God’s people responded to them building the temple (vv. 1-3)?

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Deeper Reflection

When “the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the people of the exile were building a temple to the LORD God of Israel” (v.1), they got into immediate action (vv.2-3). There is incongruence between what they say and what they are. What they say: “Let us build with you, for we, like you, seek your God; and we have been sacrificing to Him.” And what they are: “the enemies” of God’s people. There is no truth in those words which sound so religiously sound. In reality, an insidious evil intent lay behind those apparently harmless friendly words offering assistance and cooperation. Satan “disguises himself as an angel of light” and “his servants disguise themselves as servants of righteousness” (2 Cor 11:13-14). There is a constant danger of us worshipping a golden calf as celebrating “a feast to the LORD” and proclaiming “This is your God, who delivered you from Egypt” (Exo 32:4-5). Subtly present in the church is a cultural Christianity with a syncretic mixture of the Word and the world. We need to be discerning like Zerubbabel, who saw through the enemies and said, “You have nothing common with us” (v.3). Only the Word of truth enables us to discern and detect untruth.

APPLICATION

How can I keep things that sound so Christian, but are not, from influencing my thinking?

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PRAYER

Lord, while You have placed the church in the world, it is easy for the world to be in the church. But Lord, You are faithful and You will strengthen Your church and protect us from the evil one, and rescue us from perverse and evil influences.⁵¹ Keep us from stumbling and make us stand in the presence of Your glory blameless with great joy.⁵² Amen.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

⁵¹ 2 Thessalonians 3:2-3

⁵² Jude 24

THURSDAY, 30 MARCH 2017

Do Not Fear or Be Dismayed

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 4:1-5

OBSERVATION

What can you observe about the enemies of God's people in how they responded to them building the temple in verses 1 to 3 and verses 4 to 5?

Deeper Reflection

When the covert attack of the enemies on the builders of the temple failed (vv.1-3), they resorted to overt attack in three forms: discouragement, intimidation and frustration (vv.4-5).

All the three forms of attack were employed simultaneously. The Hebrew word for “discourage” (v.4a) literally means “to weaken the hands”⁵³. The enemies’ harassment to discourage was “continual and prolonged”⁵⁴, so as to weaken the morale⁵⁵ and “sap the will”⁵⁶ of the builders. We become discouraged when we lose hope and then we give up. God does allow us to go through “hope against hope” situations (Rom 4:18). But we tend to hope that God will change the situation that is wearying us. Rather, our hope ought to be in God Himself: that He fully knows what’s going on; that He will act in His time, in His way; that He is with us in what we are going through; that He will not fail us nor forsake us, and is saying to us, “Do not fear or be dismayed” (Deut 31:8). Hoping in God is an act of surrender to God. Hope enables us to endure and persevere (Rom 8:24-25) — the antithesis of discouragement.

APPLICATION

How will I look at and deal with discouragement in my life?

PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

⁵³ Edwin Yamauchi, 627

⁵⁴ Robert Fyall, 75

⁵⁵ David J. Clines, 75

⁵⁶ Robert Fyall, 75

FRIDAY, 31 MARCH 2017

Fan into Flame Your Devotion

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 4:4-5, 24; 1 Corinthians 16:10-11; 2 Timothy 1:6-7

OBSERVATION

What observations can you make about Timothy in 1 Corinthians 16:10-11 and 2 Timothy 1:6-7?

Deeper Reflection

The enemies of God's people made attempts to discourage and frighten the builders of God's temple (v.4). The Hebrew word for "frighten" "often describes the fear aroused in battle situation"⁵⁷ (Judg 20:41; 2 Chron 32:18). This gives us an inkling of what the fear was like. The enemies "bribed officials to work against them and frustrate their plans" (v.5, NIV) to get "their victims discredited and on the wrong side of the authorities"⁵⁸. It is "not expressly stated what had disheartened and frightened"⁵⁹ the builders. All we know is they conceded to the enemies' attack, their holy zeal in Ezra 3 extinguished and the "work stopped" (v.24). We may be like them — and Timothy. When Paul wanted to send Timothy to the Corinthians, he told the church: "See to it that he has nothing to fear while he is with you" and "no one should treat him with contempt" (1 Cor 16:10-11, NIV). Apparently, Timothy struggled with "timidity" (2 Tim 1:7), which held him back from going all out in his ministry, that Paul exhorted him to "fan into flame the gift of God" endowed on him (2 Tim 1:6). Like Timothy, you may be faithful but fearful, and you may need to "fan into flame" what God has given you and called you to.

APPLICATION

What do I need to fan into flame for God?

PRAYER

Write a prayer to God as your response from your meditation on and application of the Scriptures.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for lay leaders:
To fan the flame of devotion to God

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

⁵⁷ Edwin Yamauchi, 627

⁵⁸ Derek Kidner, 56

⁵⁹ F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Eerdmans, 1982), 68

NOTES

NOTES

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