



Ezekiel, Daniel, Habakkuk, Obadiah, Esther

### Call and Commission of Ezekiel

Ezekiel 1:1-3:27

Inserted Lesson: The Role of Prophecy in Scripture

Judgment for Judah Ezekiel 4:1—24:27

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Esther 1:1-10:3

Discovery is a Bible study course for the high school and adult levels. Bible references are taken from the King James Version. The companion to these Sunday school lessons is Daybreak, a daily devotional and personal Bible study continuum. All of the material is available on our website, as well as in printed form. The print version is designed to be stored in a binder; subsequent modules can then be easily inserted. Discovery is an official publication of the Apostolic Faith Church. All rights are reserved.

# DISCOVERY

Call and Commission of Ezekiel



### SOURCE FOR QUESTIONS

Ezekiel 1:1 through 3:27

### **KEY VERSE FOR MEMORIZATION**

"And he said unto me, Son of man, go, get thee unto the house of Israel, and speak with my words unto them. For thou art not sent to a people of a strange speech and of an hard language, but to the house of Israel." (Ezekiel 3:4-5)

### BACKGROUND

The prophet Ezekiel's life spanned a period of significant political upheaval. Assyria had dominated the region for over 125 years, but in 612 B.C., King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had conquered Assyria and his nation became the major superpower. In 605 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar's armies carried away the first group of exiles from Judah—a group that included the most prominent men of the country. In 597 B.C., Ezekiel was among the second group of captives deported from Judah to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar.

In the fifth year of Ezekiel's captivity in Babylon, God called him to deliver a series of prophetic messages to his fellow Jewish exiles. These were primarily predictions of judgment that would soon come upon Jerusalem and seven Gentile nations around Judah. Ezekiel immediately obeyed, although God warned him that the exiles would reject his words because they were "stiffhearted" and "a rebellious nation" (Ezekiel 2:3-4).

For more than twenty years, Ezekiel faithfully relayed God's messages through divinely ordained allegories, symbolic enactments, and apocalyptic imagery. Although his messages focused for the most part on soon coming judgment, they also provided hope for a restored Israel in the future Messianic Kingdom.

Chapter 1 describes three aspects of Ezekiel's initial vision: the four winged creatures, a chariot and its wheels that moved at the impelling of the Spirit, and God on His throne. Chapter 2 records the prophet's call and commission by God, and chapter 3, his appointment as a watchman for Israel.

### SUGGESTED RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS

**1.** Verses 1-3 of chapter 1 describe the place, manner, and date of Ezekiel's call. The phrase "the heavens were opened" indicates that Ezekiel began to see visions of God's glory—divinely inspired images not revealed to others. Why do you think God prefaced Ezekiel's call to prophetic ministry with a revelation of His glory?

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While Scripture does not directly state God's purpose in revealing His glory to Ezekiel, it may be helpful for your group to consider how we respond when we have a personal and vivid encounter with God. It makes a tremendous impact! Based on that, your students may point out that such an amazing revelation would have inspired and motivated the prophet to obedience. It would have given him strength to impart God's pronouncements in spite of the resistance he would face. The magnificence of God's glory and His holiness would also have brought into clear focus just how far from God the rebellion of the people of Judah had taken them, thus helping the prophet understand why God was about to administer such severe judgment.

While Ezekiel knew that the God of Israel was the God of all creation, it must have been comforting that there on the banks of the river Chebar, some seven hundred miles from the Temple in Jerusalem, God still made Himself known. Though the people had turned away from God, He still was watching over them and was in control of their destiny.

2. Ezekiel's first vision given in chapter 1, began with a great storm cloud that arrived from the north—a storm that represented God's judgment, which would come upon Jerusalem through the armies of Babylon. The vision itself had three parts: the four living creatures, the wheels within wheels, and the glorious throne room and One with "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD" (verse 28). What are some of the details given in verses 5-8 and 16-18 regarding the four living creatures and the wheels that propelled them?

Details given regarding the living creatures include the following.

- The four living creatures (identified as cherubim in Ezekiel 10:8-15) had feet with divided hoofs that were the color of polished brass.
- Each cherub's head had four different faces looking in four directions.
- Each cherub had wings on each of its four sides—two that were lifted and spread, and two that covered its body. Bright fire moved in the midst of the wings.

*A description of the wheels within wheels could include these points.* 

- Each cherub had two wheels at its base, one within the other at right angles.
- The four spherical wheels were very tall and full of eyes; Bible scholars suggest the eyes were emblematic of God's omnipresence and omniscience.

Your group will conclude that it is difficult to form a visual picture of exactly what Ezekiel saw. No doubt Ezekiel himself struggled to adequately describe this amazing vision. Wrap up class discussion of this question by pointing out that intimate contact with God, in whatever form we experience it, is often beyond the ability of human language to fully convey.

**3.** Verses 22-28 of chapter 1 record what Ezekiel saw of God's glory and the firmament above the cherubim—a vast scene flooded with "the colour of the terrible crystal," perhaps a spectrum of color that appeared as light refracted through crystal, with the hues of a rainbow. There was a sapphire throne, and above it, a brilliantly shining Form with the appearance of fire. This radiating brightness was an expression of the glory of God. How did Ezekiel respond to this vision of God's glory, and what attitude did his response indicate? Ezekiel 1:28

*Ezekiel fell prostrate at the sight, indicating humble surrender, overpowering reverence, and awe.* 

You could expand the discussion by pointing out that Ezekiel's vision of God's glory led him to action on behalf of God. Ask your group to discuss how a glimpse of the glory of God might impact our Christian walk. They should conclude that it should inspire and encourage us to be obedient to God and be eager to do whatever we can to advance His Kingdom, so that one day we will be able to stand before Him in confidence rather than fear.

**4.** In chapters 2 and 3, God commissioned Ezekiel as His spokesperson. More than ninety times in the book, including Ezekiel 2:1, God addressed Ezekiel by the term "son of man." This form of address emphasized Ezekiel's humanity and his lowly position in comparison to God's divine sovereignty. It also stressed the prophet's need for dependence upon God. Why is total dependence upon God necessary if we are to serve Him effectively?

Your group may come up with several answers to this question. These may include that we could be led astray by our own thinking or desires; that God alone knows the end from the beginning so we must depend upon Him for guidance; and that if we focus on being obedient whether or not we understand, we can leave the results up to Him. Success in God's sight is not dependent upon whether or not the response of others to our efforts is positive; the measure is how completely we lean on God and fulfill His instructions to us. Ezekiel obeyed, and so can we.

Ezekiel's faithfulness stands as a challenge to us. Point out to your group that Ezekiel 2:2 says the Spirit entered into Ezekiel, showing that God will not leave us ill equipped to do His will. When the Spirit of God empowers us, we will receive courage and strength to obey God in spite of any opposition we may face.

**5.** In Ezekiel 2:6, and in several other verses in chapters 2 and 3, God told Ezekiel not to be afraid. Based on the description of the people Ezekiel

was called to confront, why do you think this encouragement was needed? Ezekiel 2:3-7

The Israelites were rebels (verses 3, 5, 6, and 7), transgressors (verse 3) and impudent and stiffhearted or stubborn (verse 4). Confronting people who had these characteristics would make Ezekiel's task difficult and potentially discouraging. Most of us would hesitate to step knowingly into a career that we knew would bring hostility and abuse from those around us. Not only would Ezekiel face the complete rejection of the message he was to deliver, but he would also endure criticism and contempt on a personal level.

You could follow up by asking your group to discuss how hostility and contempt toward our obedience to God might occur in our day, and how we can best prepare ourselves to withstand it. Lead to the point that we should depend on God's Spirit to guide us in how and when He wants us to respond.

As we will see in subsequent chapters of Ezekiel, the actions the prophet took and the words he spoke to these rebellious people were directed by God. The point should be made that in whatever hostile situations we face, God can give us wisdom, guidance, and strength to conduct ourselves in a godly manner if our determination is to follow Him in obedience.

**6.** In verses 8-10 of chapter 2 and the first three verses of chapter 3, Ezekiel's willingness to obey God was challenged by a difficult command from God. What unusual action did God instruct the prophet to take, and what do you think that action symbolized?

God commanded Ezekiel to eat the "roll of a book" from the hand that was outstretched to him. The eating of the scroll symbolized fully accepting and ingesting God's message. It also indicated that the prophet was willing to do whatever God commanded him to do.

Point out to your group that according to verse 10 of chapter 2, the scroll was covered front and back with written lamentations, mourning, and woe. The predictions that Ezekiel would be called to deliver to his fellow exiles were horrific. Since scrolls typically were inscribed only on one side, the fact that this one was covered both front and back with writing may have indicated the extensive nature of God's coming judgment.

Despite its bitter contents, the scroll tasted sweet to Ezekiel—perhaps because the coming judgments were righteous and deserved. Make the point to your class that there is always "sweetness"— an inward satisfaction—in doing what God commands, even when the task itself is difficult. This could be an opportunity for some in your group to share personal examples of times when God required a hard obedience that proved to be a blessing in the end. **7.** God's instruction to Ezekiel to eat the roll of the book should cause us to ask ourselves if there are parts of God's Word and His calling upon our lives that we have not yet fully absorbed. What are the benefits of fully taking in every part of God's Word?

Your students will likely respond to this question by pointing out that fully taking in every part of God's Word will make us stronger in our faith. We need to feed ourselves spiritually just as we do physically—regularly, and not a diet from just one food group. We need a balanced diet for good nutrition. Fully ingesting means more than simply giving the Bible an occasional glance or reading only from one part of the Word of God. We must make balanced intake a consistent part of our lives.

**8.** In chapter 3 verses 16-21, Ezekiel's responsibilities were explained to him through his appointment as a watchman. What were the duties and responsibilities of a watchman in that era? Given that, how would you describe what Ezekiel was called to do?

A watchman's duty was to warn of a coming enemy. This responsibility was taken so seriously that a watchman who failed to fulfill this responsibility would be judged guilty of manslaughter. The word translated "watchman" is tsaphah, and describes one who watches from a height for the purpose of warning, rather than an individual responsible for guarding or shepherding (that word is shamar). So Ezekiel's call was to warn of the coming judgment against unrighteousness, rather than to teach righteousness.

Each person's individual accountability before God was a key part of Ezekiel's message. Verse 18 explicitly states that his purpose in serving as a watchman was so that the wicked man would turn and not die in his iniquity. For many years, God had called after the nation of Judah as a whole and they had resisted; now He was calling individuals to repentance. This is explained more extensively in chapter 18, where Ezekiel expanded the thought that every person is treated as an individual before God, and is accountable for his own sins.

### CONCLUSION

God called the prophet Ezekiel to declare coming judgment to his fellow captives in Babylon, in spite of the fact that his words would be rejected. The subsequent visions that the prophet experienced were a living reality that encompassed him completely, and he faithfully obeyed God's instructions. THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

# DISCOVERY

### Inserted Lesson: The Role of Prophecy in Scripture

This lesson is the first of three on Biblical prophecy that are interspersed in this quarter. Please note that these three depart from the textual style format of our Discovery curriculum in that they are topic-based lessons. Most of the Scripture references in these lessons are drawn from books other than Ezekiel, as each lesson will examine the Biblical view on differing aspects of prophecy. In addition, more material is included in each question, and supplemental Scriptures are provided in footnotes. The insertion of these lessons into the unit allows the chapters of Ezekiel concerning Judah's judgment to be grouped into a single lesson.

### SOURCE FOR QUESTIONS

2 Kings 17:13; Isaiah 40:1-2; Ezekiel 33:7-8

### **KEY VERSE FOR MEMORIZATION**

"For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." (2 Peter 1:21)

### BACKGROUND

The Bible was written over a period of about fifteen centuries and is the work of more than forty authors. Its sixty-six books deal with a wide range of topics and have very different literary styles, but they all provide insight and instruction that God desired humanity to have. Prophetic declarations were one way God imparted His messages, so prophecies appear in various places throughout Scripture.

While Jewish Bibles include Joshua, Judges, and 1 and 2 Samuel in the prophetic books, much of Biblical prophecy is contained in the Old Testament books called the Major and Minor Prophets—a reference to the length of the books rather than the importance of their content. These books were recorded during the decline, exile, and return of the Children of Israel to their native land, over a period of about 350 to 400 years. Most of the messages were directed to Judah and Jerusalem: the prophets Isaiah, Joel, and Micah wrote before the fall of Jerusalem; Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah prophesied at the time of Jerusalem's fall and during the exile; and Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi wrote at the time of the exiles' return and later.

Some of the prophets had names that were symbolic. Hosea means "salvation"; Nahum means "comforter"; Zephaniah means "the Lord hides"; and Zechariah means "the Lord remembers." Whether or not the prophets' names reflected their calling, all true prophets spoke with the authority of the Holy Spirit.

### OPENER

The prophetic messages recorded in the Word of God are both intriguing and mysterious because many of them concern ancient kingdoms that no longer exist. However, God included them in His Word for a reason. Prophecy can teach us many lessons about God's nature, His plan for mankind, and His desire for a relationship with the people He created. When we understand the prophets' motivations and methods, we are better equipped to grasp how their words have significance for our day.

### SUGGESTED RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS

**1.** The dictionary defines *prophecy* as "an inspired utterance of a prophet; the inspired declaration of divine will and purpose; a prediction of something to come." While "a prediction of something to come" is probably the most common usage in contemporary society, in the Old Testament era, prophecy not only was a foretelling of future events but also a way God communicated His will to His people. According to our text, what are some other purposes of Biblical prophecy? 2 Kings 17:13; Isaiah 40:1-2; Ezekiel 33:7-8

These Scriptures indicate that in addition to foretelling future events and proclaiming God's will to His people, prophecies were also given at times for the following reasons:

- 2 Kings 17:13—To admonish and instruct
- Isaiah 40:1-2—To comfort
- Ezekiel 33:7-8—To warn

Point out to your group that all of these purposes for prophecy are a reflection of God's love for the people He created, and His great desire for them to prosper spiritually through steadfast commitment and obedience to Him.

**2.** Biblical prophets were intermediaries between God and man. As emissaries commissioned to challenge His people to remembrance, repentance, and obedience, they functioned in Israel alongside other spiritual leaders such as priests and elders. Scripture also identifies the prophets as "messengers" of the Lord, "seers," "servants" of God, and "watchmen."<sup>1</sup> Each of these titles provides insight regarding the role these individuals filled.

God chose His prophets from many walks of life. They included princes and priests like Abraham and Ezekiel, but also shepherds and farmers like Amos and Elisha. Women and even children were among the prophets. Some ministered for decades, while others delivered just a single message.

Whatever the details of their personal backgrounds and messages, God's prophets were called to be a positive spiritual influence, and this frequently brought opposition by national leaders. When rulers turned away from worship of the true God, the prophets were commanded to correct them, and in some cases, to pronounce judgment. This often placed the prophets in

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life-threatening situations. What are some of the spiritual qualifications these individuals needed in order to serve as prophets of God?

Your group will likely respond to this question with a variety of suggestions, so you may wish to compile a list of the spiritual qualifications mentioned. These could include that the prophets were fully committed to God, maintained a close relationship with Him, were obedient, were courageous and able to withstand opposition, and were deeply concerned about the spiritual welfare of God's people.

You may wish to point out that these qualities are important in every field of service for the Lord. While the personalities and natural abilities of the individual prophets were likely as varied as their backgrounds, God was able to use them because of their spiritual qualifications. In our day as well, while God will use our natural abilities and personalities, our relationship with and commitment to Him are of greatest importance.

**3.** The manner in which the prophets received God's call varied. God spoke to Daniel through a dream and to Ezekiel in a vision. Some of the prophets, like Jeremiah and John the Baptist, were chosen by God before birth. Perhaps one of the most well-known and detailed calls in the Bible is found in 1 Samuel 3. Based on verses 11-18 of that chapter, how would you summarize the message that Samuel was told to deliver to Eli the priest? How did Samuel respond to God's instruction?

God directed Samuel to tell Eli that his descendants would be judged forever because he knew of his sons' wickedness but failed to restrain them.

In response to the second question, verse 15 states that Samuel was afraid to tell Eli what God had said. However, according to verse 18, he obeyed and hid nothing of God's message from the priest. This is just one of many Biblical examples of times when individuals chose to obey God in spite of their natural apprehension or the potential negative response to their words. Samuel's obedience in performing a difficult task was a first step in his decades-long service to God as a prophet of Israel.

You may wish to follow up this question by noting that many times God asks us to do things for Him that are difficult, could subject us to unpleasant responses, or seem beyond our ability to perform. That was certainly true for Biblical prophets! Ask your group to discuss how we will benefit spiritually if we obey in spite of a natural inclination to avoid such challenges.

**4.** While most Biblical prophecies were delivered orally, at times prophets were instructed to communicate through actions that were highly unusual in their culture. For example, Isaiah was told to give his sons names that symbolized prophetic truths—they would

be ongoing reminders of the coming invasion by enemy forces and of the Jewish people's eventual return to their land. Hosea was commanded to marry a woman who would be unfaithful to her marriage vows, as a picture of God's commitment to Israel in spite of the nation's spiritual adultery.<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah was instructed to bury his unwashed girdle near the Euphrates River and later to recover it when it had deteriorated beyond use, as a parable portraying the spoiling of Judah.<sup>3</sup> Ezekiel built a model representing Jerusalem's coming siege and dramatized the attempted escape of King Zedekiah through a hole in the wall.<sup>4</sup> Why do you think God chose at times to have His messages delivered through actions or dramatic reenactments?

Your group should conclude that the unusual nature of these portrayals would have made them memorable and thus more likely to be passed on by those who witnessed them. Bring out that in God's great love and mercy, He used every means possible to make His message clear and unforgettable. Still today, He goes to great lengths to draw sinners to Himself.

**5.** All the prophetic books of the Old Testament with the exception of Hosea include messages of judgment against the nations around Israel and Judah. These judgment messages reveal some important Biblical principles. What are some of the lessons we can learn by studying God's proclamations of judgment against heathen nations?

Your students' responses may bring out such points as the following.

- God will not tolerate sin.
- God's moral laws are consistent in every era and for every nation.
- God is just. He will not let evil go unpunished.
- God is universally sovereign. He works in and through the nations of the world.
- *Repentance and turning to God may forestall judgment upon a nation.*<sup>5</sup>

The fulfillment of ancient prophecies demonstrates that we can trust the Bible is truly inspired by God.

**6.** Two key prophetic themes woven throughout Scripture are the coming of the Messiah and the events that will transpire on this earth at the end of time. These topics will be studied individually in upcoming lessons in this unit. However, there are a number of other prophetic themes in the Bible that reflect the nature of God and His requirements, including the following five.

- *God is sovereign*. The prophets understood that as Creator, God had the right to control all nations and people.
- *God is holy.* Knowing that holiness is central to His nature, the prophets taught that God requires complete separation between the holy and the unholy.

- *God will not tolerate sin.* The prophets could not compromise their stern exposure of sin because the only hope for the people they addressed was a humble turning to the Lord in genuine repentance.
- *God requires obedience*. The prophets reminded the people that God had a rich purpose for them, but they must believe and follow His commandments.
- *God will judge sin.* The prophets warned that if the princes, priests, and people arrogantly rejected God's moral and spiritual principles, they would face the consequences.

How are the principles revealed in these prophetic themes applicable in our day?

Discussion of this question should bring out that all of these prophetic themes are as true in our day as they were when they were given. God is unchanging, and the principles of His Word are unchanging as well. This is one reason why a study of prophecy can be so beneficial for us today. While sin, unbelief, and opposition to the truth of God are prevalent in our world today, they were also widespread in the era of the prophets. Just as the prophetic predictions of judgment were fulfilled centuries ago, one day judgment will fall upon all who reject God.

**7.** In Isaiah 30:1-2, the prophet Isaiah pronounced woe upon the people of Israel for rebelling against God and forming an alliance with Egypt. In Jonah 3:1-4, the prophet Jonah gave a message of coming doom to Nineveh, the powerful and wicked capital city of Assyria. What were the responses to these prophetic messages? Isaiah 30:8-11; Jonah 3:4-10

Isaiah 30:8-11 records that the people of Israel rejected the truth delivered by Isaiah, demanding that he preach only "smooth" things and telling him to "cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before us." In contrast, Jonah 3:4-10 indicates that the people of Nineveh believed the words of Jonah and repented, "from the greatest of them even to the least of them."

Responses to the Gospel message today mirror the contrasting responses to the ancient prophetic messages of Isaiah and Jonah. Some people—far too many—reject the truth, preferring lies and illusions to the necessity of humbling themselves and admitting their wrongdoing. Others believe and respond by repenting and turning to God.

Point out that the response to a message from God is not the responsibility of the one delivering it. The prophet's duty, and our duty today as men and women of God, is to be faithful in communicating the truth as God instructs us or gives us opportunity. While we pray for positive results, we must continue to be faithful and obedient whether or not that is the case. **8.** Old Testament prophecies sometimes had dual or multiple fulfillments, even though the prophet spoke the prophecy as a single event. While the prophet's audience would have viewed it in the historical context of their own day, a more complete fulfillment would come later. In a sense, the prophets saw the "mountain peaks" of prophetic events, but they could not identify the "valleys" of time between the peaks. We find one example of this in God's promise of a "son" and a "house" to David in 2 Samuel 7, which was only partially fulfilled in David's son, Solomon. The second and complete fulfillment of that promise will be realized when Jesus, the "Son of Man," establishes His kingdom on earth.

Another example of this type of dual fulfillment is the "day of the LORD" referenced in Joel 2:28-32 and Amos 5:18-19. Joel and Amos viewed this as a one-time event when invading armies would bring judgment and destruction upon Israel. Based on 1 Thessalonians 5:2 and 2 Peter 3:10-13, what is the secondary and future fulfillment of these verses?

Your group should understand that the secondary and future fulfillment of these verses will occur at the Second Coming of Christ. The Scriptures indicate that "the day of the Lord" will come quickly, like a thief in the night, so Christians must be watchful and ready at any moment.

This may be a good opportunity to point out to your group that Biblical prophecy is not intended to provide believers with a complete, sequential, unfolding of the future. Allusions to coming events may only be fully understood when those events come to pass. Nonetheless, Scriptural prophecies—especially those concerning the end time—provide hope and encouragement for those whose trust is in God.

**9.** In the Old Testament, false prophets dishonestly claimed to deliver messages from God, while in actuality, they were speaking deceitfully. At times, they also spoke on behalf of false gods or prophesied for monetary gain. Based on the following Scriptures, what are some ways we can discern whether a prophet is true or false? Deuteronomy 18:22; Jeremiah 23:32; Lamentations 2:14; Matthew 7:15; 1 Corinthians 14:32-33; 1 John 4:1-3

These Scriptures point out the following characteristics of true and false prophets.

- Deuteronomy 18:22—The predictions of false prophets will not all come to pass.
- Jeremiah 23:32—False prophets often speak lies and do not encourage righteous behavior or teach things that align with God's will.
- Lamentations 2:14—False prophets do not condemn all sin.
- *Matthew 7:15—False prophets disguise their true nature.*

- 1 Corinthians 14:32-33—The messages of true prophets are in harmony with each other and the Word of God.
- 1 John 4:1–3—True prophets acknowledge that Jesus Christ is the divine Son of God.

**10.** What are some reasons that Christians of our day should study prophecy?

To wrap up this lesson, help your group understand that Christians should study all parts of the Word of God because all Scripture is inspired and given for our benefit (see 2 Timothy 3:16-17). Those who invest time in studying Biblical prophecy will develop their knowledge of God's holiness, righteousness, justice, and mercy, their understanding of God's dealings in the nations of men, and their appreciation of the Bible as God's revealed will to mankind.

### CONCLUSION

The world in which Biblical prophets delivered God's messages was much like our own—it was filled with individuals who wanted their own way, and rebelled against the instructions of the God who created them. It took courage for the prophets to proclaim what the people *needed* to hear rather than succumbing to the temptation of telling them what they *wanted* to hear. Nonetheless, these men and women of God ministered in obedience to Him, and their words have been preserved in the Scriptures for our benefit and instruction.

- 1. See Isaiah 44:26; 2 Samuel 24:11; Amos 3:7; and Isaiah 62:6.
- 2. Hosea 1:2
- 3. Jeremiah 13:4-9
- 4. Ezekiel 4:1-8, 12:3-13
- 5. An example of when judgment was restrained due to repentance is found in Jonah 3:4-10.

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# DISCOVERY

Judgment for Judah



### SOURCE FOR QUESTIONS

Ezekiel 4:1 through 24:27

### **KEY VERSE FOR MEMORIZATION**

"Now will I shortly pour out my fury upon thee, and accomplish mine anger upon thee: and I will judge thee according to thy ways, and will recompense thee for all thine abominations." (Ezekiel 7:8)

### BACKGROUND

Following Ezekiel's call and commission as a prophet (described in chapters 1-3), chapters 4-24 contain the record of the prophetic messages he gave over a period of about twenty years. Most of these messages dealt with God's soon-coming judgment on the nation of Judah, with many of them alluding to the siege and destruction of the capital city of Jerusalem.

The phrase "Behold, I am against you" appears thirteen times in Ezekiel. This revealed God's anger. and indicated that the coming judgment would exceed anything that had occurred before. Ezekiel's messages disclosed why such severe judgment would come. Israel had always been at the center of God's plan and work in the world. In spite of numerous evidences of God's favor throughout her history, the people had rejected Him in both worship and governance, and adopted their pagan neighbors' gods and practices. They repaid God's numerous blessings and great mercy with disloyalty and rampant idolatry. For many years, the prophets had cautioned the people of Judah regarding the consequences of their disobedience, but they had refused to heed the words of warning. Now, judgment would come.

### SUGGESTED RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS

**1.** Throughout Ezekiel's ministry, God instructed the prophet to present His messages in a variety of unusual ways, including parables, symbolic demonstrations, and object lessons. For example, in chapter 4 Ezekiel was commanded to publicly lie on his side for a portion of 430 consecutive days and eat starvation rations as an illustration of God's judgment. Why do you think God chose these unique methods to communicate to the exiles in Babylon what was coming upon Jerusalem?

Your class will likely conclude that God chose methods that were unique to make a vivid impression upon the people. Lessons taught through both words and actions are very memorable. It is noteworthy that in each instance, Ezekiel did exactly as he was commanded, even though many of the required actions

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were difficult or would subject him to the ridicule of his peers.

You may wish to ask members of your class to share a time when they saw a visual illustration of a spiritual principle. Some should be able to describe an object lesson they remember from Sunday school or youth camp. How did the visual illustration emphasize the concept or make it more memorable?

**2.** Chapter 5 continues God's instructions regarding actions Ezekiel was to take to depict three aspects of God's coming judgment against Jerusalem: the siege of the city, the suffering and distress of its inhabitants, and the destruction of the city and its people. In Ezekiel 5:1-4, what was Ezekiel told to do, and what did his actions symbolize (see verses 11-12)?

In these verses, Ezekiel was told to cut off his hair and beard and divide the hair into three portions to portray what would happen to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. One part of his hair was to be burned, another part was to be chopped up with a knife, and the third part was to be scattered in the wind. A very few hairs were to be removed and bound into Ezekiel's clothes.

The portion of hair burned "in the midst of the city" indicated that some inhabitants of Jerusalem would die during the siege from pestilence, famine, and fire. The portion of hair chopped with the knife revealed that some of the people would be slain outside the city. The portion of hair scattered into the wind illustrated that still others would be dispersed among the nations, but "a sword" would chase them, indicating that wherever those survivors fled, they would find no peace. Ezekiel was also to attach a few hairs to the hem of his clothing, and burn a few in a fire. This spoke of the small remnant left behind and the suffering they would endure.

You may wish to point out to your group how meticulously Ezekiel was to measure and divide his hair, even using a scale to portion it accurately. God's judgment against Jerusalem would be carried out deliberately and thoroughly. Ask your group what they think this suggests about the nature of God's judgment. They should conclude that God keeps accurate records, and He will precisely mete out His judgment of sinners according to their deeds.

**3.** Time after time, God reiterated to Ezekiel how completely the people of Judah had embraced idolatry. In chapter 8, God revealed the depth of their spiritual and moral failure by showing Ezekiel the abominations that were taking place in the Temple in Jerusalem—abominations that included the worship of ceremonially unclean animals. Given this flagrant violation of God's commands, why do you think the elders said "The LORD seeth us not" (Ezekiel 8:12)? How does this parallel the mindset of many people today?

Discussion of the first question could bring out that perhaps the elders excused their sin because they did not think God would notice their thoughts or their actions. They may have believed God had forsaken their nation, so what they did would not matter. Or perhaps they had gone so far from God that they simply had no regard for Him and never gave a thought to the consequences. In whatever manner they rationalized their sinful actions, they seemingly felt free to engage in the most corrupt of practices without any fear or compunction.

In response to the second question, your group should conclude that the same attitudes exist today among unbelievers. Even some who have been taught the truths of God's Word and know what He requires of them continue in flagrant disobedience.

**4.** In Ezekiel 11:14-21, God had Ezekiel tell the exiles in Babylon that the coming judgment would not be the end of Israel. In a restatement of a promise previously made in Deuteronomy 30:3, God said He would sustain the exiles during their absence from their land and Temple, and would regather the people to their land in the future. God said that when they did return, they would no longer pursue idolatry. What does verse 19 mean, and what evidence can you give that such a complete transformation is possible?

Verse 19 says, "And I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them an heart of flesh." This was not referring to the physical heart; it was a promise that God would completely transform His people. While this assurance of cleansing and restoration was directed to Judah, it also pointed ahead to the redemption and restoration made available for all through Christ's sacrificial death at Calvary.

Your group should conclude that testimonies of conversion are evidence of God's power to completely transform a life that has been bound by sin. You may wish to refer to 2 Corinthians 5:17 as a supporting Scripture.

**5.** In chapter 14, the elders of the exiles in Babylon came to hear from Ezekiel. Some Bible scholars view Ezekiel 14:12-21 as a reply to a question in these elders' minds: Wouldn't God spare Jerusalem because of the righteous people who remained there? At God's direction, Ezekiel responded by pointing to three of the most righteous men in Israel's history: Noah, Daniel, and Job. What Biblical principle is found in God's declaration in verse 14?

The principle revealed is that the prayers of godly people cannot prevent judgment if a nation or individual persists in rebellion against God. Amplify this by pointing out that even though Noah was a preacher of righteousness, he could not spare the ungodly around him from being drowned. Job was acclaimed by God as "a perfect and an upright man" (Job 2:3), but his prayers did not preserve his children. Daniel was a principled man who stood by his convictions even in the face of death, but he could not prevent the conquest of his nation. God was indicating that even if these three righteous men were in Jerusalem, His judgment against the city could not be withheld. God had already passed judgment on the nation's pervasive evil, and judgment was certain.

This passage is a sobering reminder that there is a line that can be crossed when God's mercy and forgiveness are no longer available. What a warning this is for every generation!

**6.** Judah's King Zedekiah rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar's rule. Since Judah's subjection to Babylon was God's decreed will, Zedekiah would forfeit his sovereignty. However, God indicated that He would not let the line of David be forever destroyed. Ezekiel 17:22-24 predicts the earthly establishment of the Messiah in the end time. The "high cedar" of verse 22 is a reference to the royal house of David, and the tender twig that Lord God breaks off and plants is the Messiah—the anointed One himself, who will be from the lineage of David. In what ways does this prophecy of the Messiah impact our lives?

This passage offers great hope to all believers, because it helps us anticipate the culmination and fulfillment of the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. One day His Kingdom will be established upon this earth, and He will bring God's blessing to the nations of the world. The "high" and "eminent" mountain is Jerusalem, where our Messiah will reign. His sovereignty will eventually be acknowledged by all people, and His Kingdom will be established forever.

7. In chapter 18, Ezekiel corrected a misconception regarding individual responsibility. By refuting a well-known proverbial saying of that era, he made it clear that each person would be judged for his own sins. There was neither inherited judgment nor reward. The wicked individual would die, no matter how righteous his parents and no matter if he himself had once been good. Conversely, God promised life to the righteous man, no matter how wicked his parents, and even if he himself had once been sinful. These judgments proved God's righteous judgment, and were intended to promote sincere individual repentance. What does Ezekiel 18:24 mean, and what Bible doctrine does it support?

Verse 24 asserts that just as past sins will not be remembered against the righteous, when an individual turns away from righteousness and goes back into sin, his former righteous acts will not be remembered and he will be judged for his iniquity.

The Bible doctrine this verse teaches is that it is possible for a person to backslide. It refutes the false

doctrine of eternal security, which holds that once an individual is saved, he is always saved and there is no possibility of backsliding. The Bible teaches, both in this verse and others, that the relationship with God can be severed. Individuals who have been born again can choose to go back into sin, just as Adam and Eve, in their righteous state, chose to commit sin. The believers' assurance and security is rooted in continued obedience and faithfulness to God.

**8.** In chapter 19, Ezekiel mourned for Judah's pending ruin. Ezekiel 19:10 states that Israel had been "planted by the waters." This is a reference to Israel's privileged and fruitful state in the past, particularly during the reigns of David and Solomon. In what ways have you been "planted by the waters," and what responsibility does that entail?

Your class should be able to point to many blessings God has given them that others in our world do not enjoy. These could include freedom of worship, access to the Word of God, the privilege of attending church where the fullness of God's Word is taught, and supportive Christian friends and fellow believers. Some may mention a godly heritage and the privilege of being raised in a Christian home. The point should be made that we ought to always be appreciative for our blessings—and recognize that with great privilege comes great responsibility. We will be responsible for the light we have received and the privileges we have been blessed with.

**9.** In chapter 20, God likened Judah and Jerusalem to a forest ready to be burned. Ezekiel was to tell the people that the coming "fire" of judgment would be kindled by God himself. What characteristics of a forest fire make it such a vivid representation of Judah's coming judgment?

Your group will likely be able to suggest a number of parallels. The point should be made that a forest fire burns quickly and indiscriminately, destroying everything in its path. According to verse 47, both the green tree and the dry tree—everyone in the land of Judah—would suffer from the devastation of Jerusalem caused by the Chaldean invaders.

Wrap up your lesson by reinforcing the fact that God's judgment upon unrighteousness is sure. We can learn from what befell Judah that though God may withhold judgment for a time because of His great mercy, it will come upon the ungodly someday.

### CONCLUSION

God is longsuffering, but there is a limit to His patience. Someday, God will send divine judgment upon the world for peoples' continued rejection of Him. We need to be sure our names are written in Heaven. THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

# DISCOVERY

**Teacher's Guide** 

Inserted Lesson:

### **Old Testament Prophecies Fulfilled in Christ**

# **LiLLiL**

### SOURCE FOR QUESTIONS

Isaiah 61:1-3; Luke 4:16-21; Acts 10:34-43

### **KEY VERSES FOR MEMORIZATION**

"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this." (Isaiah 9:6-7)

### BACKGROUND

From cover to cover, the Bible is a book of prophecy. The Old Testament contains a wide range of predictions concerning individual nations, cities, peoples, and events. However, the primary subject of prophecy in the Old Testament is the coming Messiah. His story saturates the narrative—in fact, more than three hundred Old Testament prophecies concern Him. In addition, many other passages typify or hint at the work of redemption that He would accomplish.

The New Testament documents the fulfillment of many of those prophecies and types. Hundreds of years after the era of the prophets, the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, His lineage, His betrayal, His death, and His resurrection aligned precisely with what the prophets foretold. In addition, the New Testament contains prophecies about His coming back again.

Following Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, as He walked on the road to Emmaus with two of His followers, He explained to them how the whole of Scripture foretold His coming. Ezekiel, Haggai, Isaiah, and others had spoken of Him because the central component of the prophets' teachings was the coming of the Messiah who would represent, save, and restore Israel. Jesus helped the two disciples understand that He was the "thread" woven throughout all Scripture when "beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27).

Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, we may at times be unsure about prophecies regarding Jesus. How do we know what applies to Him? And why is it so crucial for us to grasp what the Old Testament foretold about the Messiah? In this lesson, we will explore the answers to those questions and others.

### OPENER

### SUGGESTED RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS

**1.** The beauty of the Creation account in the first two chapters of Genesis was marred when Adam and Eve chose to disobey God. As a result, the relationship they had previously enjoyed with Him was severed, and the righteous nature with which they had been created was changed to a sinful one. In addition, the serpent who had tempted Eve to sin was cursed. God's pronouncement to the serpent in Genesis 3:15 is the first Old Testament Messianic prophecy. How would you explain this prophecy?

Your students should understand that this is a prophecy of Jesus' ultimate defeat of Satan. The word "seed" was a reference to Him—the Messiah and Deliverer who was to come. The statement "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed" points to the essential conflict between Satan and God, and between the followers of Satan and the followers of God.

God's announcement that Satan would wound the Messiah ("thou shalt bruise his heel") refers to the fact that Jesus, in taking on humanity, brought Himself into Satan's domain so Satan could strike him. Not only did Jesus experience the humbling aspects of being human, but He willingly endured suffering and death on the cross to provide the atonement for our sins (see Philippians 2:6-8). Jesus crushed the head of the serpent (He would "bruise thy head") and triumphed over Satan when He destroyed his work by defeating death through His glorious Resurrection. The ultimate fulfillment of Genesis 3:15 will occur when Satan is cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, to be tormented day and night for ever and ever (see Revelation 20:10).

It is important for your group to understand that God's plan was not adjusted when Adam and Eve sinned. Long before the world was created, this plan was set in motion by our all-knowing, eternal God. We read in 1 Peter 1:20 that Christ's death for mankind was "foreordained before the foundation of the world." In 1 John 3:8, we are assured that "for this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil."

2. The prophecies of the Messiah span from Genesis to Malachi—the prophet Malachi said that the "Sun of righteousness" would arise with healing in His wings (Malachi 4:2). This was part of the final recorded utterance of the Old Testament prophets. Four hundred years passed, and during all that time, devout individuals waited for the promised Messiah. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John present Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah. What do the following prophecies tell us about the Messiah's birth? Genesis 12:3; 2 Samuel 7:12-14; Isaiah 7:14; Micah 5:2; Hosea 11:1

### NOTES

These verses prophesy the following regarding the birth of the Messiah.

- Genesis 12:3—The Messiah would be a descendant of Abraham.
- 2 Samuel 7:12-14—The Messiah would be an heir to King David's throne and would reign for eternity.
- Isaiah 7:14—The Messiah would be born of a virgin.
- Micah 5:2—The Messiah would be born in Bethlehem.
- Hosea 11:1—The Messiah would be in Egypt for a time.

Follow up by pointing out to your group that we find the fulfillment of these Old Testament prophecies in the following New Testament verses.

- Genesis 12:3 is fulfilled in Matthew 1:1.
- 2 Samuel 7:12-14 is fulfilled in Matthew 1:6-16.
- Isaiah 7:14 is fulfilled in Luke 1:26-35.
- Micah 5:2 is fulfilled in Luke 2:4-6.
- Hosea 11:1 is fulfilled in Matthew 2:14-15.

**3.** Long before Christ's birth, a number of Old Testament prophets described His mission on this earth. Isaiah was one of them. Though he lived about seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus, he gave us much insight about how and what the Messiah would preach. What details about the Messiah's ministry do the following prophecies by Isaiah give? Isaiah 11:1-5; 42:1-4; 61:1-2

Isaiah foretold that the Spirit of the Lord would rest upon the Messiah, and He would have wisdom and understanding. He would judge in righteousness and reprove with equity (Isaiah 11:1-5). In addition, He would be a gentle Redeemer who would uphold justice and heal the broken (Isaiah 42:1-4; 61:1-2).

You may wish to expand your discussion by pointing out that Jesus validated Isaiah's words by quoting Isaiah 61:1-2 in reference to Himself. In Luke 4:17-21, we read that early in His ministry on earth, He stood up and read these verses in the synagogue at Nazareth, and then told those present, "This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears."

In this prophecy, Jesus announced that He came to undo five types of damage that result from sin.

- "To preach the gospel to the poor." Sin impoverishes, but the Messiah brought good news to the poor.
- "To heal the brokenhearted." Sin breaks hearts, but the Messiah brought inner healing for the brokenhearted.
- "To preach deliverance to the captives." Sin enslaves people, but the Messiah came to set them free from that bondage.

- "Recovering of sight to the blind." Sin spiritually blinds people, but the Messiah came to heal and restore those with spiritual blindness.
- "To set at liberty them that are bruised." Sin binds and harms its victims, but the Messiah comes to bring liberty and healing.

## Only the Son of God himself could bring this kind of deliverance and healing.

**4.** Perhaps one of the most beautiful and familiar prophecies regarding the coming Messiah is found in our key verses, Isaiah 9:6-7. Four descriptive names are given for the Messiah in these verses. The words "Wonderful" and "Counsellor" could be linked together in translation as being "The Wonderful Counselor." The other names ascribed to Him are "The mighty God," "The everlasting Father," and "The Prince of Peace." What do these names suggest to you regarding the character and nature of the Messiah?

Your group may come up with a number of thoughts about the Messiah's character and nature based on the names, including the following. "Wonderful" is indicative of that which is miraculously accomplished by God Himself, while "Counsellor" indicates that He will be the Authority and the people will gladly listen to Him and accept His guidance, for He will have the wisdom to rule justly. The term "mighty God" is the strongest of titles with reference to deity. This Child was to be God Himself! "The everlasting Father" alludes to the fact that though the Messiah would come as an infant, He is eternally one with the Father. "The Prince of Peace" indicates that His rule will manifest peace because He is the embodiment of peace itself.

**5.** Despite the Messiah's peaceful and healing ministry, the prophets foretold that He would be rejected by His own people and that the rulers would plot to kill Him. The prophets warned that someone who had broken bread (eaten) with the Messiah would betray Him<sup>1</sup> for thirty pieces of silver that would later be used to buy a potter's field.<sup>2</sup> Upon His betrayal, the Messiah's closest friends would desert Him.<sup>3</sup> How were these prophecies fulfilled at the close of Jesus' earthly ministry? Matthew 26:14-16, 47-50; 27:3-10; Mark 14:50

As the prophets foretold, Jesus was betrayed by one of His twelve chosen disciples, Judas Iscariot, for thirty pieces of silver. Later, when Judas returned the money to the priests, it was used to buy a potter's field. Also, after Judas's betrayal, Jesus' other disciples "deserted him and fled." Point out to your class that betrayal and desertion by one's friends is a very painful experience, but Jesus endured that for us. 6. The most detailed Old Testament prophecies about Jesus concern His death and resurrection-this was the pivotal moment in human history, and the most important event the world has ever known. Isaiah described how the Messiah would remain silent in the face of false accusations and would be beaten, mocked, and spat upon.<sup>4</sup> The Psalmist foretold that the Messiah's hands and feet would be pierced but His bones would not be broken.5 The Savior would die among criminals,<sup>6</sup> and people would cast lots for His clothing.7 Also, onlookers would taunt the Anointed One by telling Him to ask the Lord He spoke of so often to rescue Him.<sup>8</sup> Jesus fulfilled these prophecies of the Messiah's death down to the last agonizing detail during His trial and crucifixion. What does the crucifixion of Jesus mean to you?

This question is designed to cause personal reflection, so your students will respond to this question in a variety of ways based on their age, Bible knowledge, and spiritual maturity. Guide the discussion to focus on the fact that long before the world began, God had planned that the crucifixion of Jesus would be the method of payment for sin—the only payment that would reconcile sinners to a holy and loving God. Our faith is built upon the reality of Christ's death and resurrection, because Jesus' death made a way for the barrier of sin between God and man to be removed, and made reconciliation with God possible.

You may wish to conclude your discussion of this question by reading the familiar words found in Isaiah 53:5-12. How grateful we should be that Jesus gave His life as an ultimate offering for sin so that we could be redeemed!

**7.** King David foreshadowed the Messiah's resurrection by proclaiming in Psalm 16:10 that God would not abandon the Messiah to the realm of the dead or let the Messiah's body decay. He also wrote that the Messiah would ascend to Heaven and sit at God's right hand (Psalm 110:1). What proof do we have that these prophecies were fulfilled by Christ? Matthew 28:5-10, 16-17, and Acts 7:54-56

Matthew 28:5-10 records that Jesus conquered death by rising from the dead. Subsequently He appeared to His disciples (Matthew 28:16-17) and many other believers prior to His ascension (see also 1 Corinthians 15:6). The fact that Jesus is now in Heaven at the right hand of the Father was made visible to Stephen as he was martyred by stoning. He saw the glory of God and Jesus the Messiah standing at God's right hand (Acts 7:54-56).

**8.** The only reasonable way to explain the many fulfilled prophecies regarding Jesus Christ is that they were of divine origin. We read in 2 Peter 1:21, "For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the

Holy Ghost." The Old Testament, written hundreds of years before Jesus' birth, contains over three hundred prophecies that Jesus fulfilled through His life, death, and resurrection.

Mathematicians have figured that the odds of any one person fulfilling this number of prophecies are staggering. From a mathematical perspective alone, the conclusion is obvious—Jesus Christ of Nazareth truly was the Messiah, the Son of God, who came to this earth in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. Why is it so crucial for us to grasp what the Old Testament foretold about the Messiah?

*Your students may come up with a variety of* responses to this question. The discussion may ultimately bring out the following three points.

God can use Old Testament prophecy to strengthen the faith of wavering believers. We find an example of this in Matthew 11, when John the Baptist began to struggle with his faith after being imprisoned by Herod. John sent a message to Jesus, asking, "Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?" Jesus responded by directing those who delivered the message to tell John, "The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them" (Matthew 11:5). Jesus was using two separate Messianic prophecies, from Isaiah 35 and Isaiah 61, to indicate that He was indeed the Messiah.

A second reason why it is crucial for us to understand what the Old Testament foretold about the Messiah is that Christ's fulfillment of those prophecies is central to the New Testament Gospel. It is clear from the Book of Acts that the Apostles relied on two key points in their preaching: that Jesus Christ had been raised from the dead, and that He had fulfilled the predictions of the Old Testament. These two points were central to their message, and it was upon these truths that the New Testament church was established.

Another reason it is important for us to understand prophecies about the Messiah is that they are key tools in evangelism. Most secular people do not believe the Bible is a divine revelation. Yet it is impossible to explain how all the Messianic prophecies of the Old Testament could be fulfilled in Jesus Christ if they were not divinely inspired. Thus, understanding these prophecies and their fulfillment in Christ is a great way to encourage faith in the supernatural nature of the Bible.

#### CONCLUSION

Old Testament prophets offered a wide range of details about the Messiah's life, death, and victorious resurrection. Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled these prophecies so precisely that there can be no doubt that He is the promised Messiah.

- 2. Zechariah 11:12-13
- 3. Psalm 31:11, Zechariah 13:7 4. Isaiah 50:6
- 6. Isaiah 53:9

5. Psalm 22:16-17; 34:20

- 7. Psalm 22:18
- 8. Psalm 22:8

<sup>1.</sup> Psalm 41:9

# DISCOVERY

Judgment for Enemy Nations

### Teacher's Guide



### SOURCE FOR QUESTIONS

Ezekiel 25:1 through 32:32

### **KEY VERSE FOR MEMORIZATION**

"And I will execute great vengeance upon them with furious rebukes; and they shall know that I am the LORD, when I shall lay my vengeance upon them." (Ezekiel 25:17)

### BACKGROUND

After relaying God's messages of judgment to the Jewish people in previous chapters, the focus shifts in Ezekiel 25-32 as God directed the prophet to proclaim judgment upon surrounding nations. Oracles were given to seven places—Ammon, Moab, Edom, Philistia, Tyre, Sidon, and Egypt. Brief mention is also made of several additional areas.

Most of these nations bordered Judah, and they exemplified hostility toward her. God would judge them for their attitudes and aggression against His people, along with their own sins of pride and materialism. Judah's disobedience had resulted in God's stern rebuke and the people's eventual captivity, and God indicated that the punishment of these other nations would be just as severe.

These neighboring countries may not have realized that the recent overthrow of Judah by Babylon was not merely a judgment upon the Jews; it was also a warning to their own countries. Although God had focused first on the sins of His people, He would not ignore the pagan nations around them that had also sinned.

Babylon was not included among the nations addressed in these chapters. While the reason for this is not given, perhaps it was because God was using the Babylonians to execute His judgment. In Ezekiel's time, Babylon had already or would soon conquer all of these countries.

These chapters contain several important lessons:

- God is sovereign over all people and nations.
- God is just. He takes note of evil and punishes it in His own time and way.
- God sometimes uses unrighteous nations or people as His instruments of judgment.
- God's moral law is universal and all will be judged by His standards.

A recurring theme in these messages is "they shall know that I am the Lord GOD." Still today, God wants every person to understand that He is over all and is worthy of obedience, worship, and praise. Every

### OPENER

soul will recognize this in eternity. We want to learn from the fate of Judah's neighbors, and give God His rightful place in our lives.

### SUGGESTED RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS

**1.** In chapter 25, Ezekiel delivered messages against Ammon, Moab, Edom, and Philistia. What was the sin of these nations, and what punishment was predicted?

- Ammon (verses 2-7)
- Moab (verses 8-11)
- Edom (verses 12-14)
- Philistia (verses 15-17)

Note: You may wish to begin the class discussion with a map showing the proximity of these nations to Judah.

The sin of the people of Ammon was that they rejoiced when Israel and Judah fell and the Temple was desecrated. In verses 4, 5, and 7, God foretold Ammon's destruction and said that "men of the east" and animals would occupy their land.

The Moabites would not recognize Judah as God's chosen people (verse 8), and they too had rejoiced at the fall of Jerusalem. God's sentence for them was similar to His judgment upon Ammon (verses 9-11).

The Edomites were descendants of Esau, and were longtime enemies of Israel. Edom was judged for its vengeful attitude toward Judah. God said Edom would be destroyed completely "by the hand of my people Israel" (verse 14).

The sin of Philistia was revenge. The Philistines were also longtime enemies of the Israelites. David and the kings after him had been victorious against them, and they had been looking for an opportunity for vengeance, which came when the Babylonians invaded. As a result, God said He would destroy them (verses 15-17).

**2.** The messages of judgment delivered to Edom and Philistia in Ezekiel 25:12-17 include eight instances of the words *vengeance* and *revenge*. What is the definition of "vengeance"? How can we avoid God's vengeance in our lives?

Webster's dictionary says that vengeance is "punishment inflicted in retaliation for an injury or offense." Point out to your group that there is a difference between human and divine vengeance. Human vengeance may be based on spite, vindictiveness, or rage, and sometimes occurs even when no offense was intended. God's vengeance, on the other hand, is His righteous anger toward sin expressed by suitable and deserved repayment to the sinner. The punishment will not be more or less than His perfect justice demands. In today's text, God was going to execute vengeance upon Edom and Philistia for long-held wrong attitudes and actions against His people. NOTES

In response to the second question, your group should see that if we want to avoid God's vengeance in our lives, we must live in a way that is pleasing to Him. This includes having a godly attitude of kindness and forgiveness toward others. As Christians, we are not to seek revenge against those who have wronged us. God says, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord" (Romans 12:19). A spirit of retaliation, an unwillingness to forgive, or bitterness are all spiritually deadly. God's Word is clear that if we want God to forgive us, we must also extend forgiveness to others. At times, this can be extremely difficult and may take earnestly seeking God's help. A few members of your class might be willing to share times God has helped them to forgive.

**3.** Chapters 26-28 address Tyre, also called Tyrus, which was the capitol of Phoenicia. Built in two sections—part on an island and part on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea—the city was a commercial hub whose mariners were renowned. Greed and materialism were among the sins of Tyre. Its people were self-sufficient and intent upon obtaining wealth and all the pleasures and benefits that riches could buy. As a result, God said Tyre would be demolished. Greed and materialism continue to be a trap in our time. What could be some of the signs of a materialistic focus, and how can we prevent it in our lives?

Oxford Languages dictionary defines materialism as "a tendency to consider material possessions and physical comfort as more important than spiritual values." Signs of a materialistic focus could include a preoccupation with money and the things it can buy, an inordinate desire for personal gratification, extravagant spending habits, no practice of self-denial, and a failure to be satisfied but always wanting more. An abundance of material goods can cause people to feel self-sufficient, and dependence upon God may not be given much thought.

A great defense against the trap of materialism is the understanding that God is the Giver of all things, including money and material possessions. Christians should exemplify humility and moderation, understanding that everything we have comes from the hand of God. He may have allowed us to have monetary resources, material possessions, or position in society. Yet we must never allow self-gratification or excess to rule our lives. It will be helpful to consider ourselves stewards of what God has entrusted to us rather than owners, and to remember there will be a time of accountability to Him for how we have used what He allowed us to have.

**4.** Chapter 27 describes Tyre's magnificent ships, her adept mariners, and the costly merchandise that she traded. While there was much about the city to admire, God condemned Tyre for boasting, "I am of perfect

beauty" (Ezekiel 27:3). The king of Tyre (also called the prince) exemplified pride as well. Ezekiel 28:2 says he considered himself to be a god and believed he had become wealthy by his own wisdom and understanding. Ultimately, pride was what caused God to determine the downfall of Tyre and its king. What is the difference between the pride that God hates and will judge, and a sense of satisfaction about a job well done?

The pride that God hates does not honor Him or recognize that He is the Giver of every ability and resource. It focuses on what an individual has done by his own strength and ingenuity. Tyre was an example of this. Chapters 27-28 reveal that the people of Tyre felt they were invincible and glorified their human achievements in defiance of God.

In contrast, a sense of satisfaction in a job well done can actually help us glorify God. We can recognize and give thanks because God has given us the ability and the resources to do a good job, and give the glory to Him. If we are grateful to God, we are not focusing on our own abilities. Rather, we are recognizing that His beneficence to us in so many ways is what makes our achievements possible. That allows us to acknowledge a successful endeavor and accept any compliments graciously without being wrongfully proud.

**5.** Zidon (also called Sidon) was a Phoenician town about twenty miles north of Tyre. While its sin is not named, Ezekiel 28:24 indicates that disdain for Israel may have been one of its problems. What did the prophecy say would happen to Zidon, and what would the people understand as a result? Ezekiel 28:22-23

Zidon would be destroyed, and as a result the people would "know that I am the LORD." This will be the case for all people of all ages when God pours out final judgment upon this world.

**6.** The last few verses of chapter 28 extend a message of hope to the people of Israel. What was the promise given to them? Ezekiel 28:25-26

God promised that one day Israel would be restored to the land He had given to their ancestor Jacob, and they would dwell there in safety. While this promise has been partially fulfilled for the Jewish people, the complete fulfillment will come when Jesus Christ rules the world.

It could be encouraging to your students to discuss the importance of hope to us as Christians, and that our ultimate hope is to see God and have Him say, "Well done." Perhaps some of your students could share occasions when the Lord has given them hope.

**7.** Chapters 29-32 contain seven messages of judgment against Egypt. In Ezekiel's time, Pharoah and the Egyptian empire were mighty forces in the world, second only to Babylon. However, God instructed the

prophet to "take up a lamentation for Pharaoh" (32:2) and "wail for the multitude of Egypt" (32:18). In Ezekiel 32:11-12, what did God say would happen to Egypt? Given the many grievous sins of Pharaoh and Egypt, what do you think God's instruction for Ezekiel to feel sorrow for them reveals about His nature?

Ezekiel 32:11-12 reveals that Egypt would be destroyed. God would judge that nation because of its pride, and it would be conquered by the Babylonians. The prophet also stated that although Egypt would eventually experience some restoration, it would never again attain the same level of power (Ezekiel 29:13-15).

In response to the second question, your group should conclude that God does not glory in the judgment of sinners. Ezekiel 18:23 and 33:11 both indicate that God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. Judgment for sin was determined from the foundation of the world, but God's mercy allows humanity to live long enough to seek forgiveness, and provided the ultimate remedy in the Messiah.

8. Egypt had a long history of interaction with Israel, and as a result, the nation had experienced both God's favor and His judgment. During the time of Joseph, the Egyptians enjoyed the benevolence and blessing of God. Years later, when Pharoah and his people hardened their hearts against God during the time of Moses, God sent judgment in the form of devastating plagues and the eventual drowning of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea. In Ezekiel's time, the Egyptians had watched God's judgment unfold upon the nation of Judah. Egypt should have understood that rebellion against God always brings consequences. In our day, many people have heard the Gospel, yet do not follow God's instructions. How can we learn from the Egyptians and be sure that we heed what God says? And how can we encourage others, including the unsaved, to heed also?

Your class will have suggestions of steps we can take to make sure we heed God's instructions. Their lists may include:

- Ask God to give us a love for the truth.
- Study the Bible and pray.
- *Heed the checks of the Spirit, even the small- est ones.*
- *Fellowship with like-minded believers.*

Your class will also have suggestions of how we can encourage others, including the unsaved, to follow God. Their thoughts may include that if our hearts are focused on God and His Spirit is dwelling in us, others will see that in our lives. A day-by-day Christian life under every circumstance can be a great testimony to the unsaved. When we have opportunity, we want to share the Gospel with others, including by giving our own testimonies.

### CONCLUSION

The Bible says that all nations and people will one day be humbled before God, and only the righteous will enjoy His eternal blessings. The judgments that fell upon the nations in today's text should both warn and encourage all those who honor God.

# DISCOVERY

Inserted Lesson: Prophecies of End Times

### SOURCE FOR QUESTIONS

Matthew 24:3-14, 2 Timothy 3:1-5

### KEY VERSE FOR MEMORIZATION

"Behold, the former things are come to pass, and new things do I declare: before they spring forth I tell you of them." (Isaiah 42:9)

### BACKGROUND

The Bible is a written record not only of history but also of what is to come. The pages of the Old and New Testaments contain hundreds of prophesies and revelations—some of them very detailed and specific—of events that have not yet occurred. However, we know they *will* take place. Scripture is full of prophecies that already have taken place precisely as God revealed, and prophecies of events in the last days will transpire just as surely.

People around the globe discuss and debate what the future holds, though many ignore the prophetic signs playing out around them. There has never been a period in history when end-time prophecies aligned more closely with the conditions of the world than they do today. For believers, that is an exciting thought! Clearly, the culmination of God's dealing with the people of this earth will soon occur.

Fully understanding prophesies concerning coming events can be challenging, so we should approach such passages with humility rather than dogmatic absoluteness. God has given man only limited glimpses of many aspects of the future. On the other hand, Scripture is very explicit about some coming events. As followers of Christ, we should seek to understand Biblical prophecies as clearly as possible, looking to the Holy Spirit for guidance. As we explore these indicators of what the future holds, we discover God's hand in the chaos around us, and that gives us hope.

### SUGGESTED RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS

**1.** In Daniel 2, we read of a prophecy that encompassed a wide swath of world history. This chapter tells of King Nebuchadnezzar's troubling dream of a great image made of various materials, and Daniel's interpretation of the dream's meaning. Bible scholars concur that the various parts of the image represented a succession of world empires through the ages. In verse 34, the stone cut without hands that destroyed the last kingdom represents the Messiah and King of kings, Jesus Christ. Looking back through world

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history and the rise and fall of great kingdoms and dynasties, what can we conclude from this prophetic revelation about earthly powers? Why is this important to us as believers?

Your group will likely conclude that earthly kingdoms and rulers, no matter how mighty they may have seemed during their era, will all be obliterated. Bible scholars concur that the ten toes of the image in Nebuchadnezzar's dream represent ten world powers that will stem from the Roman Empire and exist at the time of Christ's return, so they likely are in existence today. When Jesus Christ returns to this earth, He will destroy Gentile world powers and set up a kingdom that will never cease.

In response to the second question, class discussion should bring out that this prophetic revelation is important to us as believers because it gives us hope. The world around us is full of turmoil and strife, but we can focus on the assurance that a better day is coming—one in which Jesus will reign over this whole earth, and peace will prevail.

2. In God's Word, the nation of Israel often is a prophetic signpost. In Isaiah 11:12 we read a specific prophecy regarding Israel: "And he [God] shall set up an ensign for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth." That prophecy was fulfilled in 1948 when Israel became a nation for the first time since 597 B.C. Since then, numerous Biblical prophecies regarding Israel have come to pass, including the return of rainfall to the land, the restoration of a pure language, the establishing of the shekel as official currency, and a number of astonishing military victories. We find another prophecy regarding Israel in Zechariah 12:1-3. In what ways has this prophecy been fulfilled in the nation of Israel?

In these verses, the prophet stated that Jerusalem would be a "cup of trembling" to all the people around her. Though Jerusalem is a relatively small city, with no significant natural resources and no port, the conflicts regarding her appear in world news almost daily. In verse 3, Zechariah foretold that Jerusalem would be "a burdensome stone for all people." Today, the Islamic world wants to destroy Israel, while the rest of the world wants to bring peace to the region by dividing Israel and Jerusalem. What many fail to realize is that no peace agreement involving this region will last until the Messiah, the Prince of Peace, sets up His kingdom and rules from Jerusalem.

If time allows, you could expand your discussion by noting that in Scripture, Israel sometimes is represented by a fig tree. Jesus said, "Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh:
So likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it [the coming of Christ] is near, even at the doors" (Matthew 24:32-33). Additional examples of signs in the nation of Israel can be found in the booklet, "A Glimpse Into the Future," available on our website at www.apostolicfaith.org. Your group should be aware that Biblical prophecies about Israel are stunningly specific and detailed. While politics in the Middle East can be confusing, one thing is increasingly clear: the eyes of the world are riveted upon Israel, the epicenter of the momentous events that will shape the world's future. The prophetic fulfillments that have already taken place in Israel have set the stage for end-time events.

**3.** One of the most detailed passages in the Bible concerning end-time events, apart from the Book of Revelation, is found in Matthew chapter 24. When Jesus' disciples asked Him what signs would precede His coming and the end of the world, He responded with a comprehensive list in a message referred to as His "Olivet Discourse." In it, Christ telescoped near future events concerning the Jewish people of His day, and distant future events that would not occur until the time of the end. Some of these signs have already occurred, some are occurring today, and some are still to come. In Matthew 24:3-14, which of the signs Christ predicted do you see occurring in the world today?

You may wish to compile a list with your class of the signs that they observe in the world today, based on these verses. A list should include widespread deception regarding Christ, wars and rumors of wars, famines and pestilences, earthquakes, persecution of Christian believers, numerous false prophets, and a lack of love. (Again, supporting facts for these categories can also be found in the booklet, "A Glimpse Into the Future.")

**4.** In addition to Jesus' warning in His Olivet Discourse, prophets in the Old Testament and Christ's disciples in the New Testament spoke of signs that would indicate Christ's return to this earth is imminent. For example, in the Old Testament, Daniel predicted that in the last days, multitudes would travel to and fro, and knowledge would increase (Daniel 12:4). Zechariah spoke of the use of nuclear weapons (see Zechariah 14:12). In the New Testament, Peter predicted that many false prophets would emerge, bringing in heresies (2 Peter 2:1-2). John the Revelator indicated that the Gospel would be preached as a witness to all nations (Revelation 14:6). Why do you think God provided so many and varied signs related to the condition of the world at the end of time?

Your group should recognize that the multiplicity of signs forewarning the end times are indicative of how important it is to believe that Christ's return will occur soon. It is vital that people make the proper spiritual preparation.

Point out to your group that there is ample instruction in the Bible about what it takes to be ready. Because God has provided so many indicators of the end of time, there will be no excuse for those who fail to prepare. Some say they believe that the end is near, but speculate that perhaps the Lord will delay His coming a few years longer. We have no guarantee of that.

**5.** In addition to foretelling world conditions just prior to Christ's return, Biblical prophecies paint a graphic picture of the human condition at that time. In 2 Timothy 3, Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, described to Timothy how the last days would be characterized by sinfulness. He introduced this portion of his epistle with the statement, "This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come." In that statement, the Greek word translated *perilous* means "hard to bear, troublesome, dangerous." Then Paul proceeded to describe what brought about the peril: the sinfulness of man. What does 2 Timothy 3:1-5 tell us about the condition of humanity in the last days?

Consider having a volunteer read each of these verses aloud so your group can discuss how closely Paul's descriptive list of behaviors in the last days aligns with behaviors we see in society today. You may wish to note each on a white board or flip chart for ease of reference.

To start the discussion, point out that the prediction that "men shall be lovers of their own selves" is the initial negative characteristic mentioned. Its placement as first on the list is appropriate because the love of self is the foundation for all the depravity that follows in Paul's description.

You may wish to bring some current news articles that illustrate one or more of the human characteristics identified in these verses as indications of the "last days."

**6.** The Second Coming of Christ is a future event so important that it is mentioned in almost every New Testament book, and the imminence of His return is a theme woven through the prophetic passages of Scripture concerning this subject. The Second Coming encompasses two separate events: the Rapture of the Church, when Christ comes to claim His waiting Bride; and the Revelation of Christ, when Jesus comes with His saints from Heaven to execute judgment upon the ungodly and to set up His Millennial Kingdom and reign on this earth for a thousand years. According to the prophetic statements Paul made to the saints in Thessalonica and Corinth, what will happen to believers at the time of the Rapture? 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17; 1 Corinthians 15:51-53

Your group should relate that believers who have died will arise from their graves to meet Christ in the

clouds. Then those who are alive and who have prepared themselves for His coming will be changed in a moment and will be caught up to join Him in the air.

Point out to your class that the word rapture does not appear in Scripture. It is derived from the Latin Vulgate translation of 1 Thessalonians 4:17, where the phrase "caught up" is translated into the Latin word rapturo, which literally means "being carried away in body or spirit."

To wrap up your discussion of this question, you may wish to read Revelation 19:7-9. These verses relate that the believers who meet with Christ at the Rapture of the Church will take part in the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, where rewards will be given for faithful service and Christ himself will serve the saints (see Luke 12:37).

7. While the Marriage Supper of the Lamb is taking place above, Bible prophecy indicates that a terrible outpouring of God's wrath will occur on earth because of mankind's rejection of God's love and mercy. In the Book of Revelation, chapters 6-19 describe that time of catastrophic trouble and terrible suffering. Daniel, prophesying of it, said, "There shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time: and at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book" (Daniel 12:1). How did Jesus characterize this time of trouble upon the earth? Matthew 24:21

In Matthew 24:21 Jesus said, "Then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be."

If time allows, briefly review what will happen on earth during the Tribulation, when God's judgment and righteous fury will be poured out upon the earth in the form of horrendous environmental catastrophes. The tribulation plagues are comprised of three groups of seven: the seven seal judgments, the seven trumpet judgments, and the seven bowl judgments. Jesus is the One who will open the first seal judgment and initiate these cataclysmic events. Depending upon the age and spiritual maturity level of your students, you may wish to ask your group to relate some of the specific events that will occur during the Great Tribulation. The section "Terrible Upheaval on Earth" in the booklet "A Glimpse Into the Future" is a good source for details.

**8.** The most dominant figure of the Tribulation period will be the Antichrist, who will step onto the stage of world power and exert global authority given to him by Satan. Initially, he will expand his empire through subtle "peace" diplomacy, but later, his true nature will be revealed. His ascent to power will be rapid, as he will be a phenomenally persuasive and brilliant man. However, he will also be extremely wicked and diabolical. According to Revelation 13:8,

all who dwell upon the earth whose names are not written in the Book of Life will worship him. Though the designation "Antichrist" only appears four times in the Word of God, this evil leader is described in various ways. How is the Antichrist identified in the following passages? Daniel 8:23; 9:26; 11:21; 2 Thessalonians 2:3; Revelation 13:1

*These passages identify the Antichrist in the following ways.* 

Daniel 8:23 – "a king of fierce countenance"

Daniel 9:26 – "the prince that shall come"

Daniel 11:21 – "a vile person"

2 Thessalonians 2:3 - a "man of sin" and "the son of perdition"

Revelation 13:1 – "a beast"

You may want to discuss some of the trends and events in the world today, with a focus on how these might help set the stage for a world leader to take control.

**9.** The Word of God contains numerous prophecies of Christ's future reign on this earth following the seven-year period of the Great Tribulation. Matthew 2:6 predicts that a governor will come out of Judah and reign over God's people. In Luke 1:32-33, the angel announced to Mary that Jesus would be given the throne of his father David, and that He would reign over the house of Jacob forever. The prophet Daniel foretold that dominion, glory, and a kingdom would be given to "one like the Son of man," and that all people, nations, and languages would serve Him (Daniel 7:13-14). Micah prophesied that Jesus would reign over Mount Zion (Micah 4:7). Isaiah vividly described a glorious kingdom given to Jesus from God, where He will rule in a royal manner (Isaiah 22:21-23). What do you think these prophetic indicators reveal about the purpose for the coming Millennial Kingdom?

Discussion should bring out that the purpose of the Millennial Kingdom will be to establish the physical rule of Jesus Christ in the earth in fulfillment of all of the Old and New Testament prophecies. Many of God's covenants and promises refer to a literal, physical, future kingdom—prophecies that He did not fulfill at His first coming. The Millennial Kingdom is when all of these prophecies will be fulfilled.

You may wish to broaden your discussion of Christ's Millennial Reign and explore with your class details about this time of peace and blessing on earth as related by Old Testament prophets. The following Scriptures are some that could be mentioned.

Zechariah 14:16 – Everyone will make a yearly visit to Jerusalem to worship the King.

*Isaiah 2:4 – There will be peace, with no wars between nations.* 

Isaiah 11:6-9 – Animal nature will be changed. Isaiah 35:6 – Sickness and disease will be eliminated.

Isaiah 55:12-13 – Vegetation will be luxuriant. Isaiah 65:20 – Mankind will enjoy longevity. Jeremiah 31:31-33 – God will renew His covenant with Israel.

Wrap up your lesson by pointing out what a glorious privilege it will be to have a part in that Millennial Kingdom. We want to do whatever is necessary to be ready for it and for all of eternity.

#### CONCLUSION

Jesus rebuked the religious leaders of His day because they did not understand the meaning of their times. We want to consider the indicators that Christ's return is imminent and be certain that we are ready. THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

# DISCOVERY

Israel's Restoration Prophesied



# SOURCE FOR QUESTIONS

Ezekiel 33:1 through 48:35

# **KEY VERSE FOR MEMORIZATION**

"Moreover I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them: and I will place them, and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore. My tabernacle also shall be with them: yea, I will be their God, and they shall be my people." (Ezekiel 37:26-27)

# BACKGROUND

The fall of Jerusalem marked a turning point in the subject, tone, and emphasis of Ezekiel's messages. Up to chapter 33, the prophet's primary purpose had been to warn the exiles in Babylon of the soon-coming judgment upon Judah (chapters 1-24) and upon the surrounding heathen nations (chapters 25-32). Once Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem, God directed the prophet to change from messages of doom and punishment to messages of comfort and future restoration for Israel. While there are still warnings in these chapters, they are part of a larger emphasis on hope.

The climax of the book comes in chapters 40-48, which describe a future time in which the people of Israel will be fully restored to their God. This restoration will fulfill the promise God made to Abraham: that his descendants would be blessed and would be a blessing (see Genesis 12:1-3). In Ezekiel's vision of God's final, perfect kingdom, the restored Temple worship portrayed Israel's future redemption and restoration in a way both the prophet and the people could understand, and confirmed God's faithfulness to Israel.

These chapters reveal the sovereignty of God, His fairness, and His good plans for Israel that will be fulfilled one day when God and His people live in a new era of blessing and communion. The book of Ezekiel opens with a vision, and closes with the longest recorded vision in the Old Testament—one that offered the people hope in spite of the depressing realities of the captivity they were enduring.

# SUGGESTED RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS

**1.** In the first nine verses of chapter 33, the prophet was reminded of his call to be a watchman who would warn the people of spiritual dangers. God declared that if Ezekiel failed to fulfill this charge, he would be held accountable for the messages he had been commissioned to proclaim. The chapter continues

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with a message from the Lord asserting that spiritual life could be gained through turning from wickedness to righteousness. What key Bible doctrines are alluded to in Ezekiel 33:13-16?

Verses 13-16 allude to the doctrines of repentance, salvation, and restitution. You may wish to discuss these verses one at a time to make sure each point is clearly understood.

Verse 13 brings out that one who trusts "his own righteousness" (depends upon good deeds) will not receive salvation through those actions. Those who "commit iniquity" (who sin) "shall die for it"—a reference to spiritual death. This verse also refutes the doctrine of eternal security, as it clearly states that previous righteous acts of an individual "shall not be remembered" if that one turns back and commits sin.

The phrase "if he turn from his sin" in verse 14 alludes to repentance. In verse 15, "restore the pledge" is a reference to making restitution. The statement in verse 16 that the one whose sins are not mentioned and who has done what is lawful and right "shall surely live," is a promise of spiritual life, or salvation.

2. Chapter 34 presents a contrast between the behavior of Israel's unfaithful shepherds—the civil and religious leaders of Israel—and the behavior of a good shepherd. Verses 2-7 outline the offences of the shepherds of Israel, which included exploiting the common people to feed and clothe themselves. In addition, they had neglected the sick and infirm, failed to search for the lost, and ruled with force and cruelty. As a result, the sheep—the people of Israel—were "scattered upon all the face of the earth" and had become prey. In contrast, what did God promise in verses 11-16 that the true Shepherd would do for the people?

Verses 11-16 indicate that out of love for His sheep, the true Shepherd would do what the unfaithful shepherds had not done. The true Shepherd would search for His sheep and deliver them out of the places where they had been scattered. He would bring them to their own land and feed them there in a "good pasture." He would cause His sheep to lie down "in a good fold," and would bind up the broken and heal the sick.

The prophetic implications in these verses were wonderfully fulfilled in the work of Jesus Christ. The idea of the Lord as the Good Shepherd of God's people goes back to Genesis 49:24, and is also reflected in passages such as Psalm 23.

**3.** Military invaders of Ezekiel's era typically employed a "scorched earth" policy designed to wipe out any future resistance by the conquered nation. Nebuchadnezzar's lengthy siege of Jerusalem had taken a devastating toll on Judah, and the land was left ravaged and uncultivated. In chapter 36, God indicated through Ezekiel that this severe judgment was because the people had engaged in idolatry and bloodshed (see verse 18). However, Ezekiel also was told to describe a coming restoration that would be truly remarkable. What specific evidences of renewal were promised in verses 8-12?

Ezekiel foretold that the dispersed people one day would be regathered to their land. The "fruit" referenced in verse 8 points to agricultural abundance—the result of the Lord himself turning toward His people and taking their side, which will make it possible for the land to be "tilled" and "sown" again. This in turn will allow for population growth and the rebuilding of the nation's cities. The resulting prosperity will surpass anything Israel has ever known. The people of Israel will once again walk upon the "mountains of Israel" (a reference to the whole land). Only through God's great mercy could such a complete restoration come to pass.

Point out to your group that in addition to the physical restoration of Israel, God also promised that one day a spiritual restoration of the people would occur. Direct your students' attention to verses 25-28, where God promised to cleanse the people, give them new hearts, and put His Spirit within them. God's mercy and His restorative power in Israel can be compared to His mercy and restorative power that transforms the lives of those who turn to Him in repentance, and find new life in Christ.

**4.** After the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, the people who survived were overcome with hopelessness. They cried in despair, "Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost" (Ezekiel 37:11). God responded by giving Ezekiel a striking and visual message of encouragement. Transported by the Spirit to the midst of a valley full of dry bones, Ezekiel was asked the question, "Can these bones live?" When the prophet responded, "O Lord GoD, thou knowest," he was told to prophesy to the bones. What happened when he obeyed? Ezekiel 37:7-10

The bones began coming together. Sinews, flesh, and skin came upon them, but "there was no breath in them"—they were not alive. Then Ezekiel was told to prophesy unto the wind. When he obeyed, breath came into the lifeless bodies and they stood to their feet, "an exceeding great army." To ensure that Ezekiel would understand the meaning of the vision, God explained it to him in verses 11-14. What a vivid and amazing picture of new life and a nation restored both physically and spiritually!

You may wish to point out to your group that an initial fulfillment of this prophecy occurred when the Jewish exiles returned to their homeland after seventy years in Babylonian captivity. A broader fulfillment took place when Israel became a nation in 1948 after nearly two thousand years of dispersion. The complete fulfillment is yet to come. **5.** In Ezekiel 37:15-17, God instructed Ezekiel to take two sticks and write on them names representing the Northern Kingdom (Israel) and Southern Kingdom (Judah). Then Ezekiel was instructed to join the two sticks together to "make them one stick" in his hand. According to verses 19-22, how was he to respond when the people asked him the meaning of this object lesson?

Through the symbolic joining of two sticks, the prophet was to tell the people that God had promised not only the restoration of the Southern Kingdom of Judah that had recently fallen, but the reunification of the whole nation in their promised land, under the rule of one king. This was an astonishing promise, since by Ezekiel's day, the nation of Israel had been divided for nearly 350 years.

Verses 23-28 of chapter 37 reveal that this prophecy will be fulfilled in the future, during the Millennial Kingdom of Christ. In that day, Israel will be a cleansed and purified people who observe the statutes of the Lord. God will make an everlasting covenant of peace with them, and will establish His sanctuary in the midst of them forever. (Note: More about this sanctuary and other aspects of restored Israel will be presented in questions 7-9.)

**6.** Ezekiel 38 and 39 are a prophecy against a confederacy of nations, referred to as Gog and Magog, that will attack Israel with the purpose of destroying the Jewish nation. This will draw God's profound anger; the words "my fury shall come up in my face" in Ezekiel 38:18 describe His wrath when enemy armies set foot in Israel. As a result, the Lord will personally intervene to defeat them. Based on Ezekiel 38:19-22, what are some of the natural elements God will use to overcome the enemy armies in this battle?

God will use a mighty earthquake, hailstones, fire and brimstone, overflowing rain, and an enemy fighting against itself to defeat the armies that come against Israel. These are all "echoes" of past events in the Bible, but will be greater in magnitude and scope than ever before as the Lord defeats the enemies of His people in this battle.

The first sixteen verses of chapter 39 continue the description of the utter destruction of Gog and Magog—an annihilation so terrible that only a small remnant of their army will survive. Ezekiel 39:9-12 indicates that all the enemies' weaponry will be destroyed. The fact that it will take seven years to burn these weapons signifies the totality of the Lord's victory and the completion of His plan to vindicate His name.

While the details of this passage are grim, reading of this great victory should encourage us with the thought that God is all-powerful and more than able to defeat any challenger who comes against Him. What a comfort it is to know that we are on this mighty God's side, and He will stand with us in any trial we face! Note: Bible scholars interpret the names "Gog" and "Magog" in various ways, but the view that seems to align most closely to the whole of Scripture is that the names represent a coalition of nations that oppose Israel rather than specific kings or military leaders. Battles that reference Gog and Magog are described in both Ezekiel 38-39 and Revelation 20:7-9, and most commentators view these as two separate events. Opinions vary as to the exact timing of the Ezekiel battle in reference to other end-time events, but the Revelation battle clearly takes place after the Millennium.

**7.** Chapters 40-42 continue the theme of Israel's eventual restoration, with a focus on Ezekiel's vision of a rebuilt Temple. This vision took place about 573 B.C., fourteen years after the fall of Jerusalem to the armies of Nebuchadnezzar. In the vision, a divinely appointed guide led the prophet through the restored Temple complex. Precise measurements were taken, and Ezekiel was told to record what he saw and declare it to the people of Israel. Why do you think it was important for the people of Ezekiel's era to hear about a Temple that did not exist at that time?

For the people of Ezekiel's day, the Temple was a symbol of Israel's national identity and of God's relationship to His people. No doubt Ezekiel's vision of a restored Temple in Israel's future brought hope because it framed Israel's future restoration and redemption in a way they could comprehend, and confirmed God's faithfulness to Israel.

This may be a good opportunity to discuss with your group how the prophecies of coming events such as the Rapture of the Church, the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, and the Millennial Reign of Christ offer us that same hope, and remind us of God's faithfulness to His own. The people of Ezekiel's day would not have understood every detail of what the prophet described to them, and we do not understand every detail regarding what will transpire at the end of time. But like them, we can take hold of the hope God offers us, and rejoice in what the future holds for every child of God.

**8.** After the vivid and detailed description of the Temple complex in the preceding three chapters, in chapter 43 Ezekiel witnessed God's return by way of the eastern gate. Then Ezekiel was transported to the inner court, where he observed the glory of the Lord fill the Temple, much as had happened at the dedication of Solomon's Temple. Though Ezekiel had witnessed the glory of God twice before, he was so overwhelmed that once again he fell on his face in reverence and awe. Since the departure of God's glory had signaled the onset of the destruction of the city and Temple, what do you think the return of God's glory symbolized?

Your group should conclude that the return of God's glory symbolized the return of God to His people, and the restoration of pure worship.

Amplify discussion of this question by pointing out to your students that one of God's accusations against the house of Israel before Judah's destruction was that they had failed to preserve the sanctity of the Temple (see Ezekiel 8). Such neglect would not be tolerated in the new Temple. In chapter 44, God gave instructions for proper worship and explicit directions regarding how they were to keep worship pure. The instructions included both obvious things that could be seen, and the less obvious attitudes of the heart.

**9.** Chapters 45-46 describe the renewal of worship in the Temple and the offerings, feasts, festivals, and worship ordinances that will one day take place in restored Israel. Many Bible scholars believe that the offerings described in these chapters are commemorations of Christ's sacrifice of Himself for the sins of mankind—they will be "picture lessons" and reminders to the people of the Messiah's marvelous saving work. What type of offerings can we bring the Lord in our day to show our gratitude and appreciation for all He has done for us?

Class suggestions will center on the fact that we must offer ourselves to the Lord, wholly and without reservation. There is no other way we can adequately express our gratitude and appreciation to Him for what He has done and provided for us.

**10.** Chapter 47 begins a description of the transformed land of Israel that continues through chapter 48. We read of the great river that flows from the Temple, which begins as a small stream but rapidly increases in size. A description is also given of the land allotments made to the various tribes. The city at the center of the restored nation will be named "The LORD is there," using God's proper name. The details found in these chapters portray a land and city very different from the Israel or Jerusalem that previously existed in all of recorded history. What blessings will be enjoyed by those living in restored Israel? Ezekiel 47:8-9, 12, 21-22

Discussion of this question will be a good way to wrap up your lesson. The specific blessings alluded to in the text include: the healing properties of the great river (Ezekiel 47:8-9), trees that provide multiple types of fruit, good both for nourishment and medicine (Ezekiel 47:12), and a designated portion of land as an inheritance (Ezekiel 47:21-22).

Amplify your class discussion by asking your group to offer thoughts about other blessings and privileges that will be enjoyed by those who dwell in restored Israel. Point out that one of the greatest blessings will be the presence of the Lord himself. Other thoughts might be: worship will be pure and unhindered; peace and perfect harmony will reign; there will be nothing present that is defiling or impure; the focus of all the inhabitants of the city will be praise and adoration for our Lord and Savior. What a hope we have of one day being part of that number!

#### CONCLUSION

Although many of us are not Jewish by birth, Jesus Christ made it possible for each of us to have an eternal possession in a place where God will dwell. What a hope! This homeland will be blessed beyond anything we can imagine, and it will be worth any effort necessary to be there.

# DISCOVERY

Hebrews Taken to Babylon

# Teacher's Guide



# SOURCE FOR QUESTIONS

Daniel 1:1 through 3:30

# **KEY VERSE FOR MEMORIZATION**

"And the king communed with them; and among them all was found none like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: therefore stood they before the king. And in all matters of wisdom and understanding, that the king enquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers that were in all his realm." (Daniel 1:19-20)

# BACKGROUND

As the prophets Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah had warned, Israel's continued sinning eventually led to God's judgment, and the Babylonians were the instrument God used to administer that judgment. In 605 B.C., the armies of King Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah. Daniel, a young man at the time, was among the first group of Jews carried into exile after Nebuchadnezzar's armies plundered and subdued Jerusalem.

Living in a pagan and idolatrous culture, Daniel maintained his integrity and allegiance to the one true God. His faithful service to the Lord in a land and culture not his own makes him an exemplary figure in Scripture.

Sometime after the overthrow of Babylon in 539 B.C., Daniel recorded his experiences and prophecies for his fellow exiles, reminding them that God had orchestrated the events of world history according to His sovereign will, and encouraging them with God's promises of restoration in the final stage of His Kingdom. The first six chapters of the Book of Daniel are historical in nature and concern Daniel's life in Babylon under three administrations. The remainder of the book records Daniel's revelations concerning Israel and various world empires.

Chapters 1-3 of the Book of Daniel are a part of the historical narrative that opens the book. Nebuchadnezzar commonly enrolled the brightest and most talented youth from conquered nations in a program indoctrinating them in the language and culture of Babylon, with the intent of equipping them to serve in his realm. The text for this lesson recounts the challenges Daniel and other Jewish captives encountered in their early years in the Babylonian kingdom, revealing how they proved their commitment to God, and how He stood with them and delivered them in times of crisis.

#### OPENER

# SUGGESTED RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS

**1.** Chapter 1 begins the account of Daniel and his three companions who were among the captives taken to Babylon. As part of their indoctrination, the young men were given a specialized diet that included a daily provision of "the king's meat." However, Daniel and the others named did not want to defile themselves by eating of this meat, likely because it had been offered to idols and so was unlawful for a Jew to eat. What did Daniel request of the person in charge of their care, and what was the outcome? Daniel 1:8-15

Daniel requested a menu adjustment from the prince of the eunuchs. However, if this official were to disobey the command regarding the captives' diet, his disobedience could incur severe punishment, so he refused the request. Daniel then proposed to Melzar, the under-steward directly in charge of the four Hebrews, that they be given pulse (dried legumes, such as lentils, chickpeas, or beans) and water instead of the prescribed diet for a trial period. This was agreed to, and at the end of the ten-day test period, Daniel and his three friends appeared "fairer and fatter in flesh" than the other candidates. This clearly was the hand of God, for a vegetarian diet would not have made a visible difference in such a brief period. Therefore, Melzar allowed them to continue with this diet.

**2.** Daniel and his companions in exile held strongly to their principles. Verse 8 indicates that Daniel "purposed in his heart" not to defile himself by eating the specific foods provided for them by the command of the king. What can we learn from this account regarding the importance of establishing and staying true to our religious convictions?

Several points will likely be made as your group discusses this question. These could include the following:

- It is best to establish godly convictions before a confrontation or crisis arises. Taking a stand for righteousness is not an impulsive whim; it requires making a purposeful decision to turn away from sinful or questionable behavior in whatever form it presents itself, and then relying on God to help us maintain that commitment.
- Seemingly insignificant decisions can have great impact. The choice made by these young men only concerned what food they would eat, but it was pivotal. Had they not made the determination to please God, their account would not be in Scripture. Daniel might never have written his prophecies, become an example of righteousness, or been in a position to influence kings.
- There is value and strength in surrounding ourselves with spiritually like-minded individuals.

# NOTES

No doubt, Daniel and his friends drew support from each other.

• God blesses those who do not compromise their faith. In the end, the dietary modifications were permitted throughout the remainder of the three-year program. God honored the purpose of the Hebrew youths to remain undefiled and gave them knowledge, skill, and wisdom far exceeding their counterparts in the program (see verse 20).

**3.** Like Daniel, we live in an environment where ungodliness and immorality are pervasive. What are some aspects of society that could destabilize your Christian values or potentially "defile" your conscience? What are some steps you can take to avoid being contaminated?

The age of your students will influence their responses to this question, and there probably will be a variety of answers. These could include: ungodly content on the internet, unbiblical worldviews presented in an academic setting, music with inappropriate lyrics, sensual advertisements, pornography, actions or activities that are prohibited in God's Word or that would reflect poorly on one's Christian testimony, etc.

*In response to the second question, your group should mention methods of avoidance such as:* 

- Making a choice to stay away from situations or things that could present a temptation.
- *Guarding our minds and hearts by resisting ungodly input.*
- Choosing our close friends from among those who will encourage godly living.
- Using the Word of God as a defense against unrighteous perspectives and beliefs.
- Leaning on the Holy Spirit for guidance.

The second question could also provide an opportunity to point out that maintaining our integrity in an ungodly environment is much easier once we have received the experience of sanctification. When we have devoted ourselves to God and set ourselves apart for His purpose and glory, we have a deep desire to please Him in every aspect of life. We are not merely conforming to a set of rules, but we behave with integrity through the transforming power of God. We have a desire to receive instruction, a readiness to obey God's Word, and a motivation to please Him.

**4.** Chapter 2 recounts King Nebuchadnezzar's troubling dream and the impossible demand he made of his wise men regarding its interpretation. Daniel and his companions were not among the wise men initially summoned before the king, but according to verse 13, they were among those to be slain. In what ways was the providential care of God apparent in this incident? Daniel 2:14-19

God's providential care can be seen in the fact that Daniel was granted access to the king, where he promised to show the king the interpretation if he were granted some time, and the time was given. Daniel and his friends prayed, and God's revelation regarding the dream's meaning came to Daniel in a "night vision" (verse 19), thus preserving the four Hebrews (and all the wise men) from death by the king's edict.

As a follow-up, perhaps some in your class would be willing to share times in their own lives when they were aware of the providential hand of God over them. You may wish to think of a personal example to begin the discussion.

**5.** Verses 24-45 of Daniel 2 describe Daniel's confident claim regarding the king's dream and his subsequent interpretation of it. The image in the dream was a prophecy of the future Gentile world powers. Looking back through the history of the world, what can we conclude about earthly governments? Why is verse 34 important to us as believers?

Your group should reach the conclusion that earthly kingdoms, no matter how dominant and impressive they may seem in their era, will one day pass away.

In verse 34, the stone cut without hands that destroyed the last kingdom represented the Messiah and King of kings, Jesus Christ, who will one day destroy all Gentile world powers, and whose Kingdom will never be destroyed. As believers, this is the hope we focus upon as we view the unrest, trouble, and violence in our current world.

**6.** Chapter 3 describes King Nebuchadnezzar's self-glorifying image, the edict for all to bow down to it, and the refusal of the three Hebrews to do so. The wording in verses 8 and 12 implies that the "certain Chaldeans" who brought the charges against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were resentful that these conscripts from a conquered nation held positions above them in authority. What three charges did the Chaldeans make against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and how did Nebuchadnezzar react to the accusations? Daniel 3:12-13

The Chaldeans' charges against the Hebrews were that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had no regard for the king, that they did not serve the king's gods, and that they refused to worship the image Nebuchadnezzar had set up.

According to verse 13, King Nebuchadnezzar reacted with "rage and fury." Ask your group why they think he was so enraged. The resulting discussion should bring out that all three accusations struck a blow at Nebuchadnezzar's pride and authority. They were clearly designed to arouse the king's anger, which was exactly his response.

**7.** Though King Nebuchadnezzar was enraged when informed that the three Hebrews had not bowed, he

offered them a chance to reverse their position (see verse 15). However, he made clear that if they refused again, they would immediately be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. What are some of the rationalizations the Hebrews could have come up with in order to obey the king and avoid this terrible fate had their trust in God not been so strong?

*Your class will likely come up with some of the following:* 

- We will go ahead and bow down, but we will not really worship—we'll just close our eyes and look like we are.
- God will understand why it is necessary for us to obey the king in this matter. He would not expect us to put our lives at risk.
- We are appointees of King Nebuchadnezzar, so we must obey him.
- We would not hurt anyone by bowing, so it should be all right just this once.
- If we are killed, we won't be able to help the rest of our companions here in Babylon.
- We are foreigners in another culture, so we need to align ourselves with their customs as a matter of respect.

The point of generating these potential excuses is to help your group see that the enemy of our souls will always provide multiple reasons, excuses, or justifications for wrong actions. However, explaining wrong behavior does not make it acceptable in the sight of God. No matter how reasonable the justifications may sound, compromising our spiritual principles will always bring disastrous results in the end.

Class discussion could be amplified by asking for examples of situations from daily life where one could be pressured to compromise, and the types of justifications that could be offered as an excuse for doing so.

**8.** The threatened punishment for not bowing before Nebuchadnezzar's image was immediately enacted. The fact that the three Hebrews were "bound in their coats" and the furnace was heated "exceeding hot" (verses 21-22) shows that everything was done to ensure the three men would be quickly and completely consumed. What details found in Daniel 3:20-27 prove the supernatural nature of the three Hebrews' deliverance?

The supernatural nature of their deliverance is indicated by the following details:

- Verse 22 The three Hebrews survived inside the furnace, while those who cast them in perished from the heat.
- Verse 25 Though the ropes binding them were consumed, the Hebrews were unhurt by the flames and walked about in the midst of the fire.

- Verse 25 Nebuchadnezzar saw a fourth Man in the furnace with the three Hebrews.
- Verse 27 When the three men were called to come out of the flames, their hair was not singed, their clothing was intact, and there was no smell of smoke upon them.

Wrap up discussion of this question by pointing out that Nebuchadnezzar was moved to great respect for the God of the Hebrews by what he witnessed that day. This was evidenced by his edict that anyone who spoke negatively of their God would be executed, "Because there is no other God that can deliver after this sort" (verse 29). This extreme turnaround by Nebuchadnezzar was a result of God allowing the three Hebrews to go through an extreme trial. In the aftermath, the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to positions of higher importance in the realm than they had previously held.

**9.** While the deliverance of the three Hebrews from Nebuchadnezzar's furnace was a mighty miracle, not every believer throughout the ages of history has been delivered. Many have suffered intense persecution and have given their lives for their faith. Why do you think God miraculously intervenes for some of His followers, but not for others?

Class discussion should lead to the understanding that God has a perfect, unique purpose for each life. He sees the big picture, operates in accordance with His divine plan, and knows precisely the timing for each piece of His plan to fit together. We will not always understand why God allows what He allows. We may not always understand why some have to suffer while others seem to go through life without any significant opposition for their faith. However, we can and must trust that every circumstance works together for eternal good. Some good supplemental verses to use in conjunction with this discussion are Romans 8:18, 28, 35-39.

**10.** How might the experiences and example of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in today's text help you deal with the challenges in your life?

Discussion of this question should revolve around the fact that, like the young Hebrews, we can thrive in our walk with God in spite of circumstances if we maintain a purpose to live to please God, and faithfully adhere to that commitment no matter what takes place around us.

#### CONCLUSION

Do we hold so strongly to our faith in God that whatever happens, we will do what He says? Such conviction helps us overcome temptation and gives us wisdom and stability in changing circumstances. Let's purpose to prayerfully live out our convictions in everyday life and trust God for the results!

# DISCOVERY

**Daniel Used by God** 



# SOURCE FOR QUESTIONS

Daniel 4:1 through 6:28

### **KEY VERSE FOR MEMORIZATION**

"Then said these men, We shall not find any occasion against this Daniel, except we find it against him concerning the law of his God." (Daniel 6:5)

# BACKGROUND

The Book of Daniel can be divided into two nearly equal parts. The first six chapters are historical in nature and concern Daniel's life in Babylon under several foreign kings. The remainder of the book is primarily a record of Daniel's revelations concerning Israel and various world empires. This week's text continues the historical narrative begun in chapters 1 through 3.

Chapter 4 covers the judgment of King Nebuchadnezzar, who reigned over the Babylonian Empire from 605-562 B.C. During that time, he led his armies in conquering numerous kingdoms and expanding and fortifying the city of Babylon. This portion of text describes the king's troubling dream and Daniel's interpretation, the king's mental failure and dethronement due to pride, and his ultimate restoration. Although the precise dates of these events are unknown, scholars believe they took place near the end of Nebuchadnezzar's reign.

The events of chapter 5 occurred sixty-six years after Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Jerusalem and the deportation of Daniel and other exiles to Babylon. During this period, Belshazzar was co-ruler of the Babylonian Empire with his father, Nabonidus. While Nabonidus was away attempting to reopen trade routes captured by Cyrus and his Persian armies, Belshazzar held a profane feast for a thousand of his lords. During the feast, a hand appeared and wrote upon the wall of the banquet chamber, and Daniel was called upon to interpret the meaning of the words. That very night, as the writing foretold, Belshazzar was slain and the Chaldean Empire fell to the combined military forces of the Medes and the Persians.

Chapter 6 records events that occurred during the reign of Darius the Mede. Daniel, by then an elderly man, was one of Darius' three presidents set over the princes of the kingdom. This chapter describes the plot the other presidents devised against Daniel because he was preferred over them, the king's distress over the punishment that could not be rescinded, and Daniel's miraculous deliverance from the den of lions.

#### OPENER

# SUGGESTED RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS

**1.** Nebuchadnezzar was the greatest of the Babylonian kings. He had been victorious in battle and was the successful builder of a flourishing realm. However, chapter 4 describes a troubling dream that destroyed his peace. When the pagan "wise men" of Babylon could not interpret the dream's meaning, Daniel (referred to by his Babylonian name, Belteshazzar) was called upon to explain it. What did Nebuchadnezzar see in his dream? Daniel 4:10-16

In his dream, the king saw a tree that was large, strong, and beautiful, and provided shade, shelter, and food. Then a "watcher"—a divine being—declared that the tree must be cut down, its branches cut off, its fruit scattered, and a band of iron and brass placed around the stump.

Ask your group what the dream portended. They should understand that the tree was symbolic of Nebuchadnezzar, and the dream clearly indicated that judgment was coming upon him. In the midst of this revelation of coming judgment, however, there were indicators of God's mercy. The fact that God gave the vision was in itself an act of mercy. And although the tree in the vision was hewn down, the stump remained, indicating there was potential for it to revive and grow again. The band of iron and brass may have symbolized the surety of God's promise of survival and restoration.

This could lead to a discussion of ways our longsuffering God still extends mercy to people in our day. Encourage your class to share examples from their own knowledge or experience of situations where God extended mercy. You may wish to share the testimony of someone who initially resisted God's call but eventually yielded. (The Gospel Pioneer booklets on our church website offer many such accounts.)

**2.** In verse 27, Daniel advised the king to humble himself, hoping that would forestall the pending judgment. However, Nebuchadnezzar did not do so. A year later, as he was walking in his palace, he boasted, "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built . . .?" When and how was God's judgment poured out? Daniel 4:30-33

God's response to Nebuchadnezzar's boastful expression of pride was immediate. The king's reason departed and for seven years, he lived as an animal in the fields. Some scholars suggest his affliction was lycanthropy, a type of mental disturbance in which the person thinks he/she has been transformed into an animal, with corresponding altered behavior. Ancient historians alluded to this, noting that for a period of time, Nebuchadnezzar was ill or weak and did not reign. The fact that the exact circumstances were not recorded is not unusual; defeats, wickedness, and weaknesses of monarchs often were omitted from national records.

Conclude your discussion of this chapter by noting that when Nebuchadnezzar recognized God, blessed

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"the most High," and gave Him praise and honor, God restored his sanity. In addition, as Daniel had foretold, his kingdom was restored (see verses 34-37). Nebuchadnezzar's praise to God indicated that he knew pride had caused his downfall. What he had gone through proved to him beyond doubt that God was well able to abase anyone who walks in pride.

**3.** The events of chapter 5 took place in 539 B.C. during the reign of King Belshazzar. The territories surrounding Babylon had fallen into the hands of the Medes and Persians, and the city of Babylon itself was under siege. However, Belshazzar seemingly felt the city was sufficiently fortified and had provisions enough to withstand any assault. In spite of the military threat, he hosted a great feast for a thousand of his lords. What profane action did Belshazzar take while the feast was underway? Daniel 5:1-4

During the feast, Belshazzar ordered that the sacred vessels of the Jewish Temple (plundered by Nebuchadnezzar fifty years earlier) be brought for use at his banquet. This sacrilegious act was accompanied by drunkenness, debauchery, and idolatry, as the guests at the feast "praised the gods of gold, and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone" (verse 4).

This could be an opportunity to discuss with your group the importance of showing proper respect for holy things. While most people with a religious background will not be tempted to be flagrantly profane or purposefully dishonor the things of God, it is possible to drift into casual behaviors that fail to show proper reverence. Ask your students to cite specific examples of behaviors that show proper respect. These might include such actions as handling the Bible with care, maintaining a reverent attitude in the sanctuary, not using euphemisms or slang related to God's name, refraining from discussion of business or monetary matters in the Lord's house, honoring the Lord's Day, and taking care to speak in a respectful manner about the ministry.

**4.** Daniel reminded Belshazzar that his ancestor, King Nebuchadnezzar, had a "heart [that] was lifted up" and a "mind hardened in pride," and God had humbled him. Although Belshazzar knew this, he ignored that warning in his family history, to his own detriment. According to Daniel 5:22-23, Belshazzar was condemned because he had not humbled his heart but had lifted up himself against the Lord of Heaven, and used sanctified vessels in a profane way. What are some indicators of a prideful spirit? What steps can we take to avoid allowing a spirit of pride to creep into our lives?

In response to the first question, your group may bring up some of the following indicators of a prideful spirit:

• Frequent self-promotion and bragging.

- Lack of empathy regarding the challenges others face.
- *Harboring of resentment or self-pity when not praised or appreciated.*
- A focus on what others think of them.
- Insistence upon their own way or personal perspective.
- Avoidance of people who are better at something than they are.
- Frequent pointing out of flaws or missteps by others.

In response to the second question, suggestions regarding steps we can take to avoid pride in our lives could include the following:

- Honor and revere God properly and consistently.
- Meditate on God's Word, and stay in close communion with Him.
- Put others first, considering others more important than yourself.
- Receive commendation gracefully, but do not focus on it. Make sure glory for achievements goes to God.
- *Remember and strive to follow Christ's example of humility.*
- Avoid listening to Satan's attempts to flatter or exalt, and to put down or discourage.

**5.** During Belshazzar's feast at the royal palace, an astonishing and disquieting event took place: a man's hand appeared and wrote a message on the wall of the banquet chamber. The message consisted of only three words, with the first repeated for emphasis. However, the wise men of the realm were unable to explain the meaning, and ultimately, Daniel was brought before the king to interpret it. How would you summarize Daniel's explanation of the words on the wall, and when was the prophetic message fulfilled? Daniel 5:25-30

Daniel gave a two-part explanation for each word. Mene meant "numbered" and referred to the fact that God had numbered the days of Belshazzar's kingdom and finished it. Tekel meant "weighed" and indicated that in God's divine balance, the kingdom was found wanting. Pharsin meant "broken fragments" (the U at the beginning of the word is a prefix meaning "and") revealing the final doom—the kingdom would be divided into pieces and given to the Medes and Persians.

The judgment announced by the handwriting on the wall occurred almost immediately. That very night, the united forces of the Medes and Persians overwhelmed and conquered Babylon. Some historians state the armies diverted the waters of the river that ran through the city, and then entered by walking along the dry channel. Others suggest that insurrectionists inside the city opened the city gates to give access to the invading armies. Whatever method was used, the city fell with almost no resistance and, as Daniel had foretold, Belshazzar himself was slain.

As a follow-up, you may wish to ask your group what lessons we can learn from this incident. After they offer thoughts, focus their attention on the certainty of divine judgment; God does what He says He will do! This is a clear warning to those who are living in rebellion toward God. However, those who are serving God wholeheartedly will find comfort in the surety of His words.

**6.** In chapter 6, Daniel's "excellent spirit" prompted power-hungry colleagues and subordinates to set a unique trap for him. They persuaded King Darius to sign a decree that prohibited making a request of anyone other than the king for thirty days. Since Daniel prayed openly and regularly to God, he had to choose whether or not he would obey the royal decree. What do you think enabled Daniel to make the decision he did?

Your group should conclude that Daniel's relationship with God and his commitment to prayer were no doubt what gave him the courage to do "as he did aforetime" and pray with his window open toward Jerusalem, in spite of the peril that action placed him in. Communicating with God was far more than an incidental occurrence in Daniel's life. His response to the decree was not a "crisis prayer" but the continuation of a lifetime practice.

Discuss with your students how Daniel's prayer life can be a model for ours. Regular times of prayer and meditation on God's Word will build a close relationship with God that will sustain us when critical tests come our way. To illustrate, ask your group to suggest activities in daily life that require advance training and practice. For example, a runner does not start eating healthy and doing a practice run the day before a marathon. A person desiring to scale a mountain does not figure out how to use crampons and an ice ax when it is time to start for the summit. Similarly, we must prepare ourselves in advance for spiritual challenges that may come in the future.

Depending on the age and spiritual maturity of your class, you may wish to point out that we should not focus on "what if" scenarios regarding trials we might face in the future. Rather, we must simply focus on building a relationship with God and an unwavering trust in Him. If we do, we can be sure that when a crisis does come, He will step in and supply the needed spiritual strength—though we may not be aware of that strength until the moment arrives.

**7.** In the Medo-Persian Empire, a formal decree by the king was so binding that even the king himself could not change it. Thus, when the jealous presidents

reported to King Darius that Daniel had disobeyed his edict, the king had no choice but to follow through with the stated punishment. What details in verses 14 and 18-20 are indicators of Darius' mental and emotional state when he became aware of the fate that awaited Daniel because of his decree?

Your students will likely point to the following details, which indicate that Darius was distraught at the result of his decree:

- Verse 14 The king was "sore displeased with himself." He attempted to find a way to spare Daniel until the going down of the sun.
- Verse 18 He was sleepless after Daniel was cast into the den, and spent the night fasting.
- Verse 19 As early as possible in the morning, he hurried to the den.
- Verse 20 His anguish was evident in the fact that he cried to Daniel with a "lamentable voice."

All of these details offer clear evidence of the king's respect for Daniel and his conscientious stand.

**8.** King Darius arose very early the next morning and went to the den of lions. He cried out, "O Daniel, servant of the living God, is thy God, whom thou servest continually, able to deliver thee from the lions?" The law had been kept; Daniel had received the prescribed punishment for disobedience to the king's decree. However, the outcome was not what Daniel's opponents expected. Daniel's voice sounded forth from the den, "O King, live for ever. My God hath sent his angel, and hath shut the lions' mouths, that they have not hurt me: forasmuch as before him innocency was found in me; and also before thee, O king, have I done no hurt." In verses 23 and 25-27, what evidences do we see of the esteem in which the king held Daniel?

Verse 23 states that the king was "exceeding glad" for Daniel, an indicator of the esteem he had for this godly and courageous man. Darius then made a second decree, commanding reverence for Daniel's God throughout his realm (verses 25-27). He was convinced of God's power because of Daniel's clearly miraculous deliverance.

Wrap up this lesson by pointing out that the only truly safe place is in the will of God. Daniel's integrity during three successive empires made it clear that he would rather die than dishonor God by forsaking his deeply held convictions. And ultimately, his upright behavior won the respect and honor of three heathen kings.

#### CONCLUSION

When we are secure in our relationship with God and are doing our best to live in obedience to Him, God will help us face challenges with composure and grace. He will not fail His own!

# DISCOVERY

Prophesies Given to Daniel



# SOURCE FOR QUESTIONS

Daniel 7:1 through 12:13

#### **KEY VERSE FOR MEMORIZATION**

"And the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people of the saints of the most High, whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him." (Daniel 7:27)

# BACKGROUND

The Book of Daniel can be divided into two nearly equal parts. The first six chapters are historical in nature and concern Daniel's life in Babylon under several kings. The remainder of the book, our text for this week, is primarily a record of Daniel's revelations concerning Israel and various world empires.

Bible scholars consider the Book of Daniel to be the major apocalyptic book of the Old Testament, as chapters 7 through 12 relate to the end times. (Apocalyptic literature is usually symbolic, visionary, and prophetic in nature, and typically was written under oppressive conditions with the intent of encouraging the people of God.) These chapters offer not only information regarding the near future of Israel in Daniel's time but also a view of end-time events with worldwide implications. The key message conveyed is that in the last days, the great nations of the world will rise up against the Lord, but God will protect His people, and the Kingdom He establishes will prevail and endure forever.

# SUGGESTED RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS

**1.** In the vision described in chapter 7, Daniel saw a number of troubling images that included violent conflict between powerful animal-like creatures, symbolizing the four successive world empires of Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. In verse 9, the vision shifts to a prophecy of the end times that is considered one of the pinnacles of Old Testament revelation. In it, Daniel saw the "Ancient of days" upon a throne, meting out judgment to the four beasts. Following the divine judgment, who came before the Ancient of days, and what was given Him? Daniel 7:13-14

Verses 13-14 record that "one like the Son of man" came before the Ancient of days. Make sure your group understands that this is a reference to Jesus Christ, who is distinct from God the Father, the Ancient of days. The designation "Son of man" is one

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that Christ used to refer to Himself. Christ was given dominion, glory, and a kingdom. Verse 14 describes His dominion as universal and everlasting—showing the supremacy of His Kingdom above all others, since these characteristics were not true of the prior kingdoms of the world.

**2.** Daniel's second recorded vision, described in chapter 8, occurred during the final year of Belshazzar's reign. In it, the prophet witnessed a conflict between a ram (representing the Medo-Persian empire), and a he-goat (representing Greece). Verses 15-17 relate that as Daniel was pondering the meaning of this vision, a divine being identified as Gabriel came to help him understand. Most of us will not experience an angelic visitation when we have questions about spiritual matters, but what are some ways God might help us gain spiritual understanding?

Suggestions may include instruction through God's Word (His revelation to us), sermons and teachings, personal counsel from the ministry or other godly individuals, Bible-based study materials, and providential circumstances. Conclude your class discussion by making clear that some of the mysteries of God will likely remain unclear until eternity, but God will never withhold knowledge from us that is necessary for our spiritual well-being.

**3.** Verses 1 and 2 of chapter 9 indicate that Daniel had read a prophecy by Jeremiah, in which he foretold that the exiles would return to their homeland after seventy years. Since Daniel had been in exile for about seventy years, he knew that the captivity was nearly at an end. In response to this understanding, Daniel fell on his face before God and prayed. What lessons can we learn about effective intercession based upon verses 2-20?

Discussion of this question should bring out several points. Verse 2 indicates that Daniel believed the divinely inspired words of Jeremiah, and belief in God's Word is a good basis for prayer. The earnestness of Daniel's prayer is evident in the descriptive phrases of verse 3: "I set my face . . . to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes." Verses 4-5 indicate that Daniel acknowledged God's greatness and the sins of his people, which he specifically named. The fact that he included himself in his confession that "we have sinned" shows his humility, and his identification with the people for whom he was interceding. He appealed to God's nature (verse 9) and reflected upon God's past beneficence (verse 15). He concluded in verses 16-19 by specifying his petition, the fulfillment of which would bring glory to God and His name. All of these actions illustrate aspects of effective intercession.

You could expand your discussion of this question by focusing on verse 18. It is noteworthy that Daniel requested God's mercy, rather than His intervention in their desperate situation. He knew the people did not deserve help. Point out to your group that although judgment will ultimately come to individuals who persist in rebellion toward God, He still extends mercy to those who repent, even though it is not deserved. If God refused to help sinners because of their past rejection of Him, it would only be their due. So when God responds with mercy instead of judgment, what praise should be offered Him!

**4.** Following Daniel's earnest prayer to God, once again the angel Gabriel came to him, this time with a message of hope. Beginning at verse 22 of chapter 9, Gabriel informed Daniel that God had put in place a timetable of seventy weeks of years, which would start when an edict would be proclaimed for the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Why do you think Gabriel gave Daniel this message? In verse 24, what six purposes did he give for the seventy weeks?

In verse 23, Gabriel told Daniel that he was "greatly beloved." While Daniel had remained true to the Lord God all the days of his exile in Babylon, no doubt what commended him to God the most was his heart for the people of Israel and his desire to intercede for them, which resulted in his impassioned prayer to the Lord on their behalf.

Following Daniel's prayer for his people, who had suffered so greatly as a result of their egregious sins against God, he was given hope. Gabriel said that in the days ahead there would be a remedy given that would bring them back to God and restore righteous order to all people whose lives had been destroyed by sin.

*The six purposes outlined in verse 24 were as follows:* 

- "To finish the transgression." Taken literally, this means that sin will finally be restrained, ending its dominion that began with Adam and Eve's first transgression against God in the Garden.
- "To make an end of sins." This means that sins will be "seal[ed] up" or "stopped." The power of sin will be broken both by changing a person's desires and purging the heart.
- "To make reconciliation for iniquity." This third purpose is accomplished through the atoning Blood of Jesus.
- "To bring in everlasting righteousness." While righteous individuals have existed throughout history, only in the new Kingdom brought in by the Messiah will righteousness be "everlasting," indicating that it will finally be permanent as sin is bound up forever.
- "To seal up the vision and prophecy." This references both the conclusion and fulfillment

of prophecy. No more revelation will be needed because all things will have been completed and fulfilled.

• "To anoint the most Holy." Many Bible scholars believe this phrase refers to the part of the Temple that contained the consecrated tools and items in the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place (the Holy of Holies). It is worth noting that others feel it is a reference to the Messiah himself, based on the fact that this is the only place in the King James Version where the word "Holy" begins with a capital H.

This chapter concludes by framing the timetable and events that will take place after the first sixty-nine weeks. The final week (seven years) is yet to come and could come at any moment. This may be a good time to remind your students that just as God's timetable has been perfectly executed in the past, He will just as assuredly finish it, and time will end at the moment of His own choosing. We must be ready.

**5.** Chapter 10 contains an account of Daniel's experience during the three weeks when he set himself to seek God, and describes what transpired. Verses 5-9 detail his encounter with "a certain man" near the Hiddekel (Tigris) river. This man had a distinct and unusual appearance, but Daniel understood the words he spoke. According to verses 12-14, the messenger was sent in response to Daniel's prayer. What explanation did he give for the fact that there had been no immediate response to Daniel's prayer? How did Daniel respond to the messenger?

The messenger made it clear that while Daniel's prayer had been heard immediately, the answer was hindered by "the prince of the kingdom of Persia" (a demonic being, or possibly Satan himself).

Daniel was overwhelmed by the appearance of the angelic messenger. He fell to the ground and his strength left him, but the man reached out and touched him, saying, "O Daniel, a man greatly beloved. . . ." (verse 11). What a profound encouragement those words must have been! The messenger went on to state, "I am come for thy words." This is another of many reminders in the Book of Daniel that prayer brings results—it is not merely a therapeutic exercise for the one who prays.

**6.** In chapter 11, the angelic messenger began explaining to Daniel the divine plan regarding what would occur in the future of the Jews. Verses 1-35 allude to various ancient rulers, concluding with Antiochus IV Epiphanes, a Greek ruler who defiled the Temple in about 168 B.C. While there were no doubt many parts of the plan that Daniel could not fully comprehend, the revelation offered reassurance for God's people. When they observed previously

foretold events taking place as predicted, they would recognize that God was shaping man's actions in conformity with His will. What does the knowledge that God has planned and ordained the events occurring on the world stage today mean to you?

Class discussion should bring out that the knowledge that God is in control offers tremendous comfort and encouragement to believers. It helps us understand that the events occurring around us are not terrifying or even just random happenings without meaning, but rather, they are all part of God's plan for the end times. While we may undergo difficult and challenging circumstances before Jesus returns to take us out of this world, He will be with us and help us triumph as we keep our trust in Him.

Focus your group's attention on Daniel 11:32, which foretold the time when Antiochus IV Epiphanes would turn on Jerusalem and the Jewish people. While some of the Jews would forsake their covenant with God and embrace Greek culture and customs at that time, those who knew their God would be "strong" and "do exploits" in the face of incredible pressure and opposition. In like manner, when we face challenging circumstances, we can cling to God with the assurance that He will strengthen, uphold, and encourage us. While our "exploits" for Him may be different from those of the Jews of Daniel's time, like them we will be enabled to live in a godly manner and stay true to our commitment to God.

7. In chapter 11, verse 36, Daniel's narrative appears to transition from a historical figure to a person who will exalt himself above all gods, including the God of gods. In the New Testament, this individual is referred to as the Antichrist. The remainder of the chapter describes some of the wars the Antichrist will engage in and the establishment of his headquarters in Jerusalem. The Antichrist will prosper until he sets himself up as god in the Temple in the middle of his seven-year rule. Daniel 12:1 indicates that after the Antichrist breaks his covenant with Israel, there will be "a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time." What is this "time of trouble" a reference to, and who will be protected?

This is a reference to the Great Tribulation—a period during which people on earth will experience unparalleled trouble, darkness, and torment. During that time, the Archangel will protect the remnant of Jews whose names are written in the Book of Life. This is an indication that a remnant of Jews will believe on Jesus Christ as their Savior during the second half of the Tribulation. (For further discussion of the Tribulation period, you may wish to refer to Zachariah 13:8-9, Revelation 7:4-8, and Revelation 14:1.) **8.** Given the events described in chapters 7 through 12, and Daniel 12:1, how would you summarize why is it so important to be ready for Christ's return?

Your students will likely mention avoiding the Tribulation as a reason for being ready for Christ's return. Make sure the discussion also includes the glorious truth that those who are ready for Christ's return will have the privilege of taking part in the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, described in Revelation 19:7-9.

God wants us to have our eyes on the skies. We do not know the day or the hour of Christ's return, but we do know that those who are watching and waiting for Him will be ready when He comes. There is ample instruction in the Bible about what the Lord expects His followers to be, and the Book of Daniel should challenge all of us to make sure we are ready.

#### CONCLUSION

In Daniel 12:9-10, Daniel was told that the prophecies he had received would be "closed up and sealed" and not understood until the time of the end. So while Daniel offers us a glimpse of future events, we have no need to try to completely decipher them. The angel went on to tell Daniel to live out his life, and then rest as he waited for the resurrection at the end of time when he will participate in Christ's Millennial Kingdom. That is also good advice for those of us today who are waiting for the return of Jesus.

# DISCOVERY

The Book of Habakkuk



# SOURCE FOR QUESTIONS

Habakkuk 1:1 through 3:19

# **KEY VERSE FOR MEMORIZATION**

"Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation." (Habakkuk 3:17–18)

### BACKGROUND

Habakkuk wrote during a turbulent period of Judah's history, likely during the reign of Jehoiakim, and shortly before the Babylonians' siege and capture of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. Little is known of the personal details of Habakkuk's life; we are merely told in Habakkuk 1:1 that he was recognized as a prophet. The probable time frame of his ministry would make him a contemporary of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and possibly Zephaniah and Obadiah.

Verse 1 of our text describes Habakkuk's prophetic vision as a "burden," indicating that it was a message of destruction. The Southern Kingdom of Judah was deep in sin, and the prophet was troubled about why evil seemed to go unpunished. His perplexity and distress intensified when God revealed that judgment would come to Judah at the hand of the wicked Chaldeans (Babylonians). Habakkuk complained that the Chaldeans were worse than the people of Judah, with a reputation of aggression, cruelty, and horrible atrocities. He struggled with why God would use such an evil nation as His tool of judgment.

In chapter 2, Habakkuk determined to watch and wait for God's answer to his questions. God gave him a vision (a prophecy or revelation) of events that would come upon Judah. He then pronounced five "woes" of judgment upon the Chaldeans, assuring Habakkuk that justice against that nation would be accomplished in God's time and according to His plan.

Habakkuk responded in chapter 3. In his prayer, written in the form of a psalm, he sought revival, recalled various historic deliverances of Israel, recognized God's power over creation and the nations, and rehearsed how God had previously delivered Israel through anointed leaders. Although the stress of the current situation remained, Habakkuk concluded with a declaration of trust in God and a proclamation of God as his strength.

#### OPENER

#### SUGGESTED RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS

**1.** Habakkuk began with the searching question, "O LORD, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear!" In the original Hebrew, the order and tense of his words reveal that the prophet's question was an indictment of sorts. In essence, he was lamenting, "I have called and You have not listened!" In Habakkuk 1:3, what words describe the cause of the desperation felt by the prophet?

Your students' responses should establish the setting for Habakkuk's prophecy. Verse 3 references iniquity, grievance (misery or travail), spoiling (desolation), violence (injustice), strife, and contention. A contemporary rendering might be, "Must I forever see this sin and sadness all around me? Wherever I look, there is oppression and bribery, and men who love to argue and fight." Clearly, Habakkuk was deeply concerned about the corruption that had flourished seemingly unchecked around him.

Point out that Habakkuk was not alone in feeling overwhelmed by circumstances. Many other Bible characters, such as Job, David, and Daniel, faced perplexing and desperate situations, and questioned God. Ask your group to share some present day circumstances that might cause them to ask God a question similar to the one posed by Habakkuk. Discussion could center on personal challenges such as losses, uncertainties, pain, and the struggle to thrive spiritually in a hostile environment. Alternatively, answers could revolve around a broader view of the injustices, violence, and ungodliness rampant in today's society.

Wrap up your discussion of troubling circumstances by encouraging your group to do what Habakkuk did when his heart was overwhelmed—he poured out his feelings to God. That is still the best course of action when we face difficult situations. We never want to allow them to cause us to doubt God or rebel against Him.

**2.** God often works in ways beyond our comprehension. He responded to Habakkuk's question by stating in verse 5 that He would do something to cause onlookers to "wonder marvellously"—they would be completely astounded. In Habakkuk 1:6, what did God say would happen to the land of Judah?

God said the Chaldeans (Babylonians) would invade the land, and the independent and prosperous nation of Judah would become a vassal state.

It might be helpful to give your group some historical perspective. The phrase "in your days" in verse 5 indicated that the prophecy would be fulfilled during the lifetime of the hearers. History records that the Babylonians began a rapid rise to power around 630 B.C. Egypt, a former world power for centuries, was crushed almost overnight. By 605 B.C. the Babylonians had conquered Assyria, the previous

#### NOTES

dominant power, and had destroyed Assyria's capital of Nineveh, ransacking it completely.

Though the prophesied events regarding Judah's invasion were astounding, like all God-inspired prophecy they came to pass exactly.

**3.** The prophet questioned why a holy God would use an evil nation as an instrument of judgment on His own people. However, in Habakkuk 2:1, he determined to station himself like a watchman on the wall and wait to see how God would respond. What attitude do you think was indicated by Habakkuk's portraying himself as a watchman?

Your students' responses may vary, but discussion should bring out that Habakkuk's portrayal of himself as a watchman suggested an attitude of expectancy, alertness, and waiting. While his determination to "set me upon the tower" was probably a figurative reference to a place of prayer rather than a physical location on the city wall, the prophet had a purpose to wait and watch for God's response. You may wish to point out that the words "I am reproved" in verse 1 do not indicate that Habakkuk was anticipating rebuke from God because of his question; in the original language, the words mean "counters my argument."

Amplify your class discussion about watchmen by bringing out that a watchman had a view and perspective which was greater than what could be obtained from the ground. Clearly, Habakkuk wanted to be in the best possible position to receive the message from God that he knew would come in time. Bring out that when we pray and the answer does not come immediately, we should follow Habakkuk's example. Circumstances, either personal or larger in scope, can sometimes obscure our spiritual vision. Purposing to watchfully focus on God instead of the troubling circumstances will help us be alert to His moving.

**4.** God's response to Habakkuk's questions is recorded in Habakkuk 2:2-3. In what form did the answer come, and what assurance did it offer the prophet?

The answer came through a vision (a prophecy or revelation). It assured Habakkuk that judgment would occur in the future, and that God had an appointed time when what He had revealed would be accomplished. Point out that the word translated tarry in verse 3 means "be behind" and the implication was that fulfillment would come in God's time.

There likely will come times when, like Habakkuk, we are called to wait for the Lord's hand to move. During those times, we may gain a clearer perspective of what the Lord is trying to accomplish. However, even if we continue to be perplexed, we are called to trust the One who is above all we see and know, with the assurance that He is good and just.

You could amplify the class discussion by asking your students to suggest some strategies to employ

during such times. Responses may include prayer, study of God's Word, fellowship with other believers, sharing our burden with a godly friend or mentor, shifting our focus to others, participating in the work of the Lord, etc.

**5.** God reminded Habakkuk that "the just shall live by his faith" (Habakkuk 2:4). In the light of what was ahead for the people of Judah, why was this an important point for the prophet to remember?

Since the prophet himself would be impacted by the judgment coming upon Judah, it would be important for Habakkuk to remain unwavering in his personal faith in God's holiness and justice.

Point out to your class that in our day too, God's response concerning difficult situations such as persecution, suffering, vengeance, etc. may not be the one we hoped for. At times we may be called to simply endure. Whether or not we receive a comforting promise regarding the future, we must cling to our faith in a just God, trusting that He is arranging all things according to His purpose. Our part is to trust Him, knowing that His divine plan will always work together for good.

**6.** List the five "woes" detailed in chapter 2—the essence of the "burden" written and delivered by the prophet—which indicated that God's justice would be meted out to the Chaldeans also.

The five woes can be summarized as follows:

- Habakkuk 2:6-8—Woe to the greedy.
- Habakkuk 2:9-11 Woe to the covetous who exalt themselves.
- Habakkuk 2:12-14—Woe to the violent.
- Habakkuk 2:15-17—Woe to the shameless drunkard.
- Habakkuk 2:18-19—Woe to the idolater.

Your students should understand by this list that God will not countenance sin. The evils condemned in Habakkuk's day will incur God's judgment whenever or wherever they exist. One way or another, sin will always be met with God's justice. You may wish to assure your group that as believers, we sent our sins on to judgment when we were justified through Christ's atoning death on Calvary. Unbelievers, however, will face their sins at the Great White Throne Judgment, where justice will be delivered.

**7.** In Habakkuk's concluding prayer, recorded in chapter 3, the prophet entreated God for a revival of His work among the people of Judah. While his word pictures and historical allusions may not be entirely clear in our era, what clues can you find in this chapter concerning how to pray for revival in our day?

*Class discussion could include the following points.* 

- The format of the prayer indicates an attitude of worship, and it is always beneficial to approach God in a worshipful manner.
- Habakkuk acknowledged God's power and glory with reverential fear, and those who come to God seeking revival in our day should have a similar awe.
- The prophet referenced God's working on behalf of His people in former days. When we pray, it is good to recall past blessings from God's hand.
- Habakkuk stated that it was God's work he was seeking and not anything else. Personal revival will only come when God is the sole focus of our prayers.
- The prophet expressed urgency in regard to timing. It was "in the midst of years"—the time period he was living in—that he needed God to work. Successful prayers in our day will also involve a sense of urgency.
- The prophet came in humility, acknowledging God's wrath as the rightful response to the sins of Judah, but imploring God to remember mercy. Repentance was needed because sin was rampant in Habakkuk's nation. In our day too, obstacles to receiving from God must be cleared out of the way before revival can occur.

**8.** Habakkuk ended his prophecy with a dynamically personal declaration. Summarize his conclusion, given in Habakkuk 3:17-18. What do his words in these verses teach us?

A summary of these verses should bring out that the prophet's words were an affirmation of faith. He was determined that even if devastation wiped out everything, his trust in God would remain unchanged, and he would continue to rejoice in Him.

Habakkuk's words teach us that as Christians, our joy is not dependent upon our situation or circumstances because it flows from our relationship with God. His plan encompasses even our current situation and challenges.

**9.** In the final verse of the book of Habakkuk, the prophet declared, "The LORD God is my strength . . ." and then went on to allude to the agility and balance of a deer in treacherous high places. What point do you think he was making with this illustration?

The agility and balance of a deer in high places is an illustration of the fact that God will give His followers surefooted confidence, even in difficult times and "dangerous terrain." An all-powerful Creator, an interceding Savior, and the Holy Spirit as our Teacher provide the stability and agility we need in every challenging circumstance. Conclude your class time by pointing out that in the first chapter of Habakkuk, the prophet had asked God why evil individuals seem to prosper while godly individuals suffer. At the conclusion of the prophecy, he seems to understand that in reality, this is not the case. He saw that God is in control of all events, and ultimately, His justice will prevail.

# CONCLUSION

While we cannot see all that God is doing or will do in the future, we can rest assured that He is God and He will do what is right.
# DISCOVERY

The Book of Obadiah



### SOURCE FOR QUESTIONS

Obadiah 1:1-21

#### **KEY VERSE FOR MEMORIZATION**

"For the day of the LORD is near upon all the heathen: as thou hast done, it shall be done unto thee: thy reward shall return upon thine own head." (Obadiah 1:15)

#### BACKGROUND

Obadiah's prophecy, recorded in the brief book bearing his name, is unique in that the prophet had little to say to the nations of Israel or Judah. Instead, his focus was on the sins of Edom, Judah's southern neighbor, and the judgment God would send upon that nation.

The age-old, smoldering animosity between the descendants of Jacob and the descendants of Esau had flared up once again, as it had many times in prior centuries. The first and largest portion of Obadiah's prophecy is the condemnation of Edom. Fearlessly, the prophet delivered God's message: disaster was coming. Despite the Edomites' arrogant pride and the supposed security provided by their natural defenses, the nation would be destroyed because of their treachery toward their "brothers" in Judah.

After delivering his scathing denunciation, Obadiah's concluding words contain a foreshadowing of end times in a reference to the Day of the Lord, a prominent Old Testament theme. In that great day, Edom will be among the godless nations to be judged. By contrast, Mount Zion will be a scene of holiness and deliverance. The house of Jacob (Israel and Judah) will possess the territories God gave their forefathers, and "the kingdom shall be the LORD's" (Obadiah 1:21).

While we do not know if Obadiah's prophecy stirred a reaction in the streets or palaces of Edom, it has unquestionably provided a somber reminder for the children of God through the ages. His message tells all Christians everywhere that God's perfect justice will one day prevail over those who ignore the needs of others, rejoice at their problems, or take advantage of their crises.

#### SUGGESTED RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS

**1.** Obadiah's prophecy was inspired by a "vision" or divine revelation. As an ambassador (or messenger), he had been sent among the people of Judah with a "rumour [report or tidings] from the LORD" (verse 1). According to verse 2, what was the rumor, and how would you explain what this message meant?

#### OPENER

#### NOTES

The message declared that Edom would be made small among the heathen and would be "greatly despised." Discussion of the meaning should bring out that God was announcing that He would cause the surrounding nations to consider the Edomites to be insignificant, and to view them with disdain or contempt.

Point out to your group that although this had not yet happened, the prophet used the past tense, saying, "I have made thee small" (emphasis added). God had condemned Edom, and the judgment to come was as sure as if it were already an accomplished fact. This could be an opportunity to discuss with your group the infallibility of what God says. Point out that the Old Testament contains hundreds of predictions concerning individual nations, cities, and peoples, and without exception, these all have been or will be fulfilled.

**2.** Verse 3 begins a series of detailed indictments against Edom. First, the prophet stated that the Edomites were filled with pride, and that their pride had deceived them. In what ways do you think pride is deceptive?

Class discussion should bring out that pride inflates self. It makes people believe things about themselves and others that are not true. Ask your group to share examples of deceitful pride. Some suggestions could be: It can make individuals think they are capable and self-sufficient when they are inadequate. It can cause individuals to feel they are powerful though they have no ability to control circumstances. It can make them think they are important when they are really insignificant. It can make them assume they are wise, when in fact they are foolish.

Wrap up the discussion by pointing out that in spite of the Edomites' inflated opinion of themselves, they actually were a small, relatively poor, and insignificant nation. However, they were not the last people to be deceived by pride!

**3.** Verses 3-4 point to one source of the Edomites' feeling of security—the fact that they lived in a location with unique natural fortifications. The capital of the Edomites, known then as Sela (and later as Petra), was a city carved into rock cliffs, and was accessible only by a narrow canyon almost a mile long. Since the Edomites dwelt "in the clefts of the rock," they thought they were impregnable to invading armies. However, God indicated that their trust was misplaced, and that He would bring them down from their lofty location. What are some aspects of life that people of our day put their trust in? Why is such trust so precarious?

Your group will likely offer examples such as education, material resources, position, other people, their own personal skills, etc. Reputation, appearance, knowledge, and many other things can also be sources of false security.

In response to the second question, class input should bring out that false security often is based on temporal circumstances—situations or resources that could change or disappear in a moment of time. By contrast, true security comes from the One who knows our future needs and has proven His concern and ability to care for us whatever comes our way. We want to depend upon God's wisdom and resources rather than our own. Your students might be willing to share examples of when God's wisdom and resources helped them.

**4.** In verses 5-6, what two types of individuals did Obadiah refer to, and how did he describe the extent of Edom's devastation?

Obadiah referred to robbers and grape gatherers in his description of Edom's complete devastation. He pointed out that even a thief would only take as much as he could carry, and those who harvested grapes would typically leave some behind for the gleaners. In contrast, those who would come to destroy and plunder Edom would take everything, leaving nothing behind for looters or gleaners. The Edomites were proud of their possessions, but all of Edom's treasures and wealth, though hidden in supposedly inaccessible caves and fortresses, would be found and taken from them.

Broaden your discussion by asking your class to name some of the things that sin robs people of. Examples could include one's reputation, honor, a clear conscience, the trust of others, health, material resources, family, etc. Ultimately, either in this life or the hereafter, sin will rob people of everything, and the eternal loss and devastation will be complete.

**5.** According to verse 7, by whose hand would the destruction of Edom come?

Obadiah foretold that Edom's destruction would come at the hands of those who had been their allies. The Edomites trusted in their confederacy, and the neighboring countries that supposedly were at peace with them. However, when God brought judgment, they would know the sting of treachery. Their former allies would be the ones to drive the Edomites out of their own land, "even to the border."

As a follow-up question, you may wish to ask your group to suggest ways alliances could be a detriment to us spiritually. Resulting discussion should bring out the need for great care in choosing intimate friends, spouses, or business partners. Close connections with those who do not share our spiritual goals can sidetrack us, lessen our focus on godly pursuits, or even derail us spiritually.

**6.** The Edomites were proud of their wise men. In spite of the reputation of these supposedly wise individuals, how do we know that they were actually foolish? Obadiah 1:8-9

They were foolish because they ignored and actually mocked God. As a result, they would share in the judgment upon Edom. Discussion should develop the thought that true wisdom will always acknowledge and honor God. To amplify your group's consideration of this topic, you could have a volunteer read James 3:17 where the Apostle defines true wisdom by listing its eight distinctive properties.

**7.** God never sends judgment that is not deserved. In verses 10-14, Obadiah told the Edomites why this awful devastation was coming upon them. What did he say Edom had done that resulted in God's judgment?

In general, Edom had perpetrated violence against their "brother Jacob." More specifically, when strangers attacked Judah and foreigners entered Jerusalem's gates, Edom did nothing to help. In spite of the ancestral bond between Edom and Judah, the Edomites stood by and rejoiced at Judah's troubles, and then used their distress as an occasion to exalt themselves. They collaborated with the invaders and took of the plunder. Finally, when they encountered refugees of Judah who were fleeing from the attacking army, they killed them or turned them over as prisoners.

Explain to your group that Edom possibly thought their actions would gain them favor with the armies of Babylon. However, their treachery toward Judah was inexcusable in God's sight and brought about the dreadful judgment that Obadiah foretold.

**8.** Today, we can see people who are much like the Edomites of Obadiah's time. Arrogance, pride, dishonesty, and envy are all around us. What is the appropriate response when we observe such individuals suffering distress or calamity?

Discussion should bring out that we should never be exultant when we see misfortune or tragedy come to others, even if we think retribution is deserved. God loves every individual, even the most wicked of sinners. Point your class to Proverbs 24:17, which instructs: "Rejoice not when thine enemy falleth, and let not thine heart be glad when he stumbleth." God is merciful, and we want to cultivate that attitude as well, even toward those who threaten or harm us. At the same time, we know that God sees and knows what is happening. When mercy is rejected, eventually judgment will come, as it did in the case of the Edomites.

**9.** Obadiah's prophecy ends with hope and encouragement (verses 17-21). The prophet looked forward to a day when "the children of Israel shall possess that of the Canaanites," when "saviors" (deliverers) will come to Mount Zion, and "the kingdom shall be the LORD's." What parallel do you see between the prophet's final statement of hope to the people of Judah, and the hope we have for the future?

Just as the inhabitants of Judah could look forward to eventual deliverance and a restoration of the land God had promised to Abraham's descendants, we look forward to our eventual deliverance from this world of sin, and the joy of spending forever in God's eternal kingdom.

#### CONCLUSION

Through the prophet Obadiah, God told Edom that the people of Judah whom they had viewed with disdain, plundered, and killed, would one day be restored and enriched. Let us learn from this book not only how certainly God will judge the wicked, but also how much He values His own!

# DISCOVERY

The Book of Esther



### SOURCE FOR QUESTIONS

Esther 1:1 through 10:3

#### **KEY VERSE FOR MEMORIZATION**

"For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14)

#### BACKGROUND

The Book of Esther is a compelling illustration of God's providential hand at work. Although no direct mention of God occurs in the book, detail after detail reveals His sovereignty. Even though the Jewish people had been exiled from their homeland because of their disobedience to God, they were still the objects of His divine mercy while living in Persia.

The events in this book occurred over an approximate twelve-year span, beginning around 483 B.C. During this period, the Persian Empire was the largest the world had ever known. Shushan, the capital city, was the location of King Ahasuerus' winter palace where most of the happenings in the book took place. Ahasuerus' regime enjoyed an abundance of wealth, which he flaunted before the world to portray the empire's strength and power.

Chapters 1-2 record that when the king's first wife was banished for refusing to make an appearance at the king's banquet, Esther was chosen to be the new queen. Esther's Hebrew name was Hadassah, meaning "myrtle." Her Persian name, Esther, meant "star," and likely was a reference to her beauty.

Esther's relative and guardian, Mordecai, was a Benjamite living in Shushan. Although the events of the book took place some eighty to ninety years after his great-grandparents had been brought there in captivity, he had not lost sight of his heritage or his identity as a Jew. In chapters 3-4, Mordecai refused to pay homage to Haman, the king's prime minister. Infuriated, Haman devised a plot to destroy all the Jews in the kingdom. Mordecai heard of this plan, and in the well-known words of this week's focus verse, he challenged Esther to go before the king on behalf of her people.

Chapters 5-10 relate how Esther courageously made her petition to the king and pled for the protection of her people from Haman's wicked devices. As a result, Haman was executed and Mordecai promoted

#### OPENER

to a position of honor. The king then issued a new decree allowing the Jewish people to defend themselves, thus preserving them from extinction and maintaining the Davidic lineage from which the Messiah would one day come.

The Jewish people celebrate this deliverance on their annual holiday of Purim. The name is the plural form of the Hebrew word *pur*, meaning "lot." This two-day feast takes place on the fourteenth and fifteenth days in the Jewish month Adar, which typically occurs in February or March. It is a celebration of joy, in which special food is eaten, children dress in costumes, and the participants react loudly at the mention of Haman's name as the entire Book of Esther is read.

#### SUGGESTED RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS

**1.** In chapter 1, an angry King Ahasuerus asked his advisors what he should do when his queen, Vashti, refused to appear at his banquet. Memucan, one of those advisors, suggested that the queen's refusal would incite kingdom-wide insubordination among the women, and that they would rise up against their husbands. What did Memucan recommend the king do, and what did he suggest would be the outcome? Esther 1:19-20

Memucan recommended that the king depose Vashti and put another woman in her royal position. He assumed this step would cause all women of the land to honor their husbands.

Point out to your group that neither Ahasuerus nor his advisor could have imagined that heeding this advice would ultimately save a people from extermination. However, that is exactly what happened. Vashti's banishment set the stage for the selection of Esther as queen and the subsequent events recorded in the Book of Esther.

**2.** Mordecai apparently had a role in the Persian legal system, as we are told in chapter 2 that he "sat in the king's gate." That was where civil trials took place; individuals who sat in the gate were judges or other government officials. Verses 21-23 of chapter 2 describe an assassination plot against the king, which Moredecai overheard and reported to Esther. Esther, in turn, "made known this plot to the king," and the assassination attempt was foiled. What can we conclude about Moredecai's character based on his civic role and his actions after learning of the plot against the king's life?

Your group will likely conclude that Mordecai must have been an honorable man of good character. He was also loyal and faithful, both to his Jewish heritage and to the king he served, even though that king represented a nation that had held his people in captivity.

As a follow-up question, ask your group why it is important for us to behave honorably even when NOTES

circumstances are less than favorable. Discussion will revolve around the fact that people are watching our lives, and godly behavior will be most apparent in a "dark" environment. If we are faithful and honest in all we do, God can use us, even though we may be unaware of that happening. Wrap up the discussion by pointing out that in the story of Esther, after investigation found the assassination plotters to be guilty, Mordecai's honorable action was noted in the court records (see verse 23). That may have seemed inconsequential at the time since no reward was given to Mordecai. However, that written record later had great bearing on the preservation of the Jews.

**3.** In Esther 3:5-6, we read of Haman's plot to destroy the Jewish people in revenge for Mordecai's refusal to bow down to him—he persuaded the king to issue a decree ordering the extermination of all Jews on a certain date. As the Jewish people contemplated a brutal end to their lives, their families, and their nation, it no doubt seemed that Satan was in control. In our day too, it may seem at times that evil is winning the battle against righteousness. How can the account of Esther encourage us to have a different perspective?

Discussion should center on the fact that the Book of Esther proves God is always in control, even when it seems otherwise. God had a master plan to save the Jewish people, and many incidents in this account were perfectly timed to bring about that deliverance. While God's plan was not apparent to the Jews as they looked ahead to what seemed sure destruction, little by little each piece of God's plan came together. Today, we too can be assured that God is working in the circumstances we face, and that His plan will triumph in the end.

**4.** Queen Esther had a role in God's plan, and Mordecai reminded her of that when he asked the rhetorical question of our focus verse, "Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" What did Mordecai want Esther to do, and why was his instruction dangerous for her? Esther 4:8-12, 16

Mordecai urged Esther to go before the king and make supplication for her people. Esther responded that to do so would put her life in danger because Persian law stated that anyone who came unsummoned into the king's presence could face the death penalty. In addition, an appeal for her people would reveal her identity as a Jew, which could also jeopardize her safety.

Direct your group's attention to verse 16, which reveals the most important part of the preparation Esther made for taking this life-endangering step: she asked Mordecai to gather the Jews together to fast for her. The implication was that prayer would accompany the fasting, as the two normally were practiced together in the Jewish religion. Point out to your students that the support of fellow believers is an invaluable resource when we face difficult challenges. Some members of your group might be willing to share accounts of times when they were supported by the prayers of other Christians.

**5.** After the king authorized Esther's presence, she invited the king and Haman to a banquet rather than immediately voicing her request regarding her people. Haman was joyful when he left that banquet, no doubt elated over the honor of dining personally with the king and queen. However, his joy disappeared when Mordecai once again refused to bow to him. What words would you use to describe Haman's mindset and attitude toward Mordecai? Esther 5:9-13

Your group will likely suggest such words as angry, bitter, indignant, vengeful, and irate to describe Haman's attitude. He was so consumed with his hatred of Mordecai that he could hardly restrain himself. Even the prospect of another banquet with the queen and king could not soothe his outrage.

Point out to your students that Haman seemed to have it all: money, fame, power, and position. In spite of this, the disapproval of one individual made Haman feel worthless and frustrated. This is an accurate illustration of how empty the rewards of this world are. They will never satisfy.

**6.** In reviewing the timing and events of chapter 6, what evidences do you see of God's providence? Esther 6:1-2, 4, 10

Verses 1-2 indicate that on the night Haman was plotting revenge against Mordecai, King Ahasuerus could not sleep, so commanded that a book be read to him. Any of the historical records of the realm could have been chosen, but the portion selected to combat the king's sleeplessness was the one that told how Mordecai had saved the king from assassination.

After discovering no reward had been given Mordecai for his integrity, the king inquired, "Who is in the court?" Verse 4 indicates that Haman was there because he had come that morning to ask permission to kill Mordecai. His presence in the court at that precise time was no mere coincidence.

It was also no coincidence that when the king asked what should be done to one whom the king wished to honor, Haman assumed the honor was for himself. After providing the king with recommendations based on that assumption, verse 10 relates that Haman had to endure the ultimate humiliation of leading the man he vehemently hated through the streets of the city, proclaiming that this was how the king honored a man in whom he delighted.

These instances, and numerous others in the Book of Esther, clearly point to the providential hand of God. Time after time, God intervened and arranged circumstances to bring about His plan. **7.** Chapter 7 describes Esther's second banquet for the king and Haman, and her courageous request on behalf of her people. What was the implication of her statement in verse 4 that selling her people into slavery would not "countervail the king's damage"?

Esther's statement implied that what the Jews produced as employees of the Persian empire significantly outweighed what the king could have gained by selling them into slavery. Instead, the Jews were being "sold" to destruction. Explain to your group that this was an allusion to the money Haman had offered the king to persuade him to decree the destruction of the Jews (see Esther 3:9). Esther was exposing the truth—that Haman was not a faithful servant of the king, but a man more interested in accomplishing his own desires than in obtaining any benefit to the realm.

Briefly review with your group the subsequent events of this chapter: the king's anger at Haman's actions, the sentence against Haman, and Haman's execution. The first two verses of chapter 8 indicate that Haman's property and possessions were awarded to Mordecai; it was common in that culture for the property of criminals to be confiscated. In addition, Mordecai was promoted to the highest position in the realm under the king—the same position Haman had held. Point out to your students that while we should not expect earthly rewards for being faithful to God, often He does bless us in that manner.

**8.** The final verse of chapter 8 relates that many of the people of the land became Jews as a result of the mighty deliverance the Jewish people experienced at the hand of God. What are some other benefits that may result from times of hardship and suffering?

Class discussion of this question will likely bring up a number of different answers, and include both personal benefits and benefits to others. These may include the following.

- Because of our suffering, we will be able to empathize with and encourage others who are going through a similar trial.
- The Word of God becomes increasingly precious to us, and our faith in and closeness with God grows.
- Our perspective on what really matters is increasingly focused on eternal realities.
- We are an example to others of God's power and the sustaining grace that He gives to His children. Whether it is healing for the glory of God, peace in the middle of the storm, or the assurance of Heaven in the face of death, the world will take notice.

Your students should conclude that when we go through hard times, we may impact those around us in ways we never imagined, and that impact could have eternal results. **9.** When the king issued a second decree, this one allowing the Jewish people to defend themselves, the mourning of the Jews turned into joy. Why do you think Mordecai instructed the Jews in Esther 9:20-22 to commemorate their deliverance every year with an annual feast? What are some steps we can take to ensure we do not forget spiritual victories in our lives?

Mordecai no doubt instituted this commemoration because it is all too easy to forget the great victories and blessings God gives. In addition, Mordecai wanted to be sure that future generations knew of the deliverance God had granted to His people.

*As your group discusses the second question, suggestions could include the following.* 

- Establish a "faith shelf" and purposefully recall times the Lord has answered prayer.
- Note answers to prayer in a notebook or diary.
- Testify at church and in one-on-one encounters in daily life.
- Establish a time of regular devotions in your home.
- Pass on stories of victories God has won for your family to the next generation.
- Celebrate spiritual birthdays and other milestones.

Wrap up your discussion by pointing out that just as the Jews celebrate God's deliverance on a regular basis, it will bless and encourage us to make an effort to remember God's blessings to us as well.

#### CONCLUSION

Although the name of God is not mentioned in the Book of Esther, His providence and deliverance are manifested in a spectacular way. God cares about the needs of His people and He will show Himself mighty on their behalf when they walk according to His plan.

## Exile in Babylon

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#### Ezekiel 1:1-3

Ezekiel worked for God right where he was—among the exiles in various colonies near the Kebar\* River in Babylonia. Jerusalem and its Temple lay over 500 miles away, but Ezekiel helped the people understand that, although they were far from home, they did not need to be far from God.

\*or Chebar

## Judah's Enemies

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#### Ezekiel 25:1-17

Ammon, Moab, Edom, and Philistia, although once united with Judah against Babylon, had abandoned Judah and rejoiced to see her ruin. But these nations were as sinful as Judah and would also feel the sting of God's judgment.

## **Taken to Babylon**

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#### Daniel 1:1-7

Daniel, as a captive of Babylonian soldiers, faced a long and difficult march to a new land. The 500-mile trek, under harsh conditions, certainly tested his faith in God.

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### The World of Esther's Day

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#### Esther 1:1-4; 10:1-3

Esther lived in the capital of the vast Medo-Persian Empire, which incorporated the provinces of Media and Persia, as well as the previous empires of Assyria and Babylon. Esther, a Jewess, was chosen by King Xerxes\* to be his queen. The story of how she saved her people takes place in the palace in Susa.

\*or Ahasuerus

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