The goal of Cornerstone Connections is to lead you to the Bible to see the big story of God and people. This big story continues from the first generation in Eden to your generation today. It’s about the lives of people as the God of the universe interacts with them.

If you are looking for a word from God that is real, Cornerstone Connections captures the message of Scripture and challenges you to make the connections to your real life.

God’s Word is not only real; it is rock-solid. For the first generation to hear God’s voice in the garden as well as the last group standing before Christ at the Second Coming, the Word of God has been and continues to be reliable.

The word from God comes to us in the stories of people who encountered Him and made a decision to either follow Him or walk away.

Real. Solid. Stories. You will find one in Into the Story in each lesson. Out of the Story will provide you with ways to search for truth you can apply to your life. In each lesson you will also find:

- **What Do You Think?** —a mental activity to get your mind and heart in gear for the story to follow. Every time you approach a Bible story, you are coming to it in the context of the story in which you live every day.
- **Did You Know?** —a brief statistic or definition that digs a little deeper into the story or simply provides some helpful facts to bring to the lesson.
- **Key Text** —a verse that points out a key concept from the story. It is also a great place to find verses that you can memorize and store away for later use.
- **Punch Lines** —a few other verses from Scripture that punctuate key concepts of the lesson. You may see connections between them and the Bible story as well as your own life.
- **Flashlight** —a brief snapshot of Ellen White’s input on the story. These glimmers that shed light onto the biblical passage will also give you a glimpse of what awaits you in the suggested weekly reading from her inspired commentary on the stories—the Conflict of the Ages.*
- **Other Eyes** —a couple of quotes from various contemporary or historic sources that may open up a slightly different perspective on the central message of the lesson.
- **Making It Real** —the guide to making the truths about God in this story your very own. Begin here if you are studying this lesson on your own prior to, or after, studying it in a Sabbath School class. Each day of the week you will be directed to explore one of the sections of the lesson, to relate it to the story you live, and to make the message from God apply to you personally.

Welcome to Cornerstone Connections.

— The Editors

PS. Don’t forget to check out the reading plan.

*A special modern adaptation has been created just for you by the Ellen G. White Estate and the Pacific Press Publishing Association. Get more info about it at: www.cornerstoneconnections.net.
October

6—Temple Building and You [p. 5]
God’s people work together to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem, in spite of setbacks, difficulties, and perils.

13—I Want You Back! [p. 9]
Satan worked feverishly to discourage the returning exiles in their work, reminding them of their sins and shortcomings. But God, through Zechariah, gives His people a message of hope.

20—Build It [p. 13]
God continues to encourage His people that their labors to build His Temple are not in vain. And neither are ours today.

27—A Story of Faith [p. 17]
Esther puts her life on the line in order to save her people and their faith.

November

3—Esther’s Victory [p. 21]
Victory over Satan’s power in our world and in our lives is God’s work. But grasping that victory takes courage and faith.

10—Leading Them Home [p. 25]
Ezra’s leadership reveals a desire to be in right relationship with God and have a passion for God’s people—qualities that are still in need for leaders today.

17—Nehemiah, the Kneeologist [p. 29]
Of all the admirable qualities he possessed, Nehemiah’s greatest attribute is displayed in his initial response in first turning to pray to God as the source of redemption and hope.

24—Risky Witness [p. 33]
Nehemiah’s role in the king’s court, as well as his relationship with the king, is what put Nehemiah in place to make a difference for his people.

December

1—Getting It Right [p. 37]
When the Jewish people had ignored clear guidelines from God on proper treatment and resources for the poor, Nehemiah and others rallied the resources to buy back their brothers and sisters from bondage.

8—Hungry for More [p. 41]
The aged prophet Ezra reads the law to his people. Unfamiliar with God’s law and His will for them, the throng was starving to hear and know.

15—A Candle in the Dark [p. 45]
The prophecies of Isaiah come from a troubled time in Jewish history. Yet the same One whom Isaiah prophesied about to bring deliverance from sin, fear, and discouragement for the Israelites is the same One who will accomplish that for us today.

22—The Servant Hero [p. 49]
When Jesus came, He was not the kind of Messiah Israel was hoping for. Their hope was for deliverance from their immediate problem—political oppression. Jesus came to be a different kind of Leader.

29—Eternal Liberation [p. 53]
Being in a sin-stained world has its share in our choices regarding our eternal destiny. But Isaiah proclaimed a message of hope that would set his people free and take them home to Jerusalem to begin a new life.

At www.InsightMagazine.org you can join the Web forum and help shape the future. Discuss the Sabbath School lessons in a virtual community.

*Insight* has stories of people today from which you can learn practical ideas for reality living.
This was a time of wonderful opportunity for the Jews. The highest agencies of heaven were working on the hearts of kings, and it was for the people of God to labor with the utmost activity to carry out the decree of Cyrus. They should have spared no effort to restore the temple and its services, and to reestablish themselves in their Judean homes. But in the day of God’s power many proved unwilling. The opposition of their enemies was strong and determined, and gradually the builders lost heart” (Prophets and Kings, p. 572).

“We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the temple that was built many years ago.”

(Ezra 5:11, NIV)
If you could design a Seventh-day Adventist church sanctuary from scratch, and money were no object, what elements would you include, if any, from the list below?

- stained glass windows
- cushioned pews
- kneeling benches
- wood floor
- slate floor
- flat, not too high ceiling
- high-pitched ceiling
- small electric organ
- large pipe organ
- air-conditioning
- theater-style seats
- large screen and projector
- window wall with pastoral view
- plush, soft carpet on the floor
- regular-size clear windows

Do any of those things say anything about our identity as a denomination? When you think of the identity of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, does it include thoughts of a certain style of church or worship style?

The name “Seventh-day Adventist” was purposefully chosen as a testimony to our beliefs, “Seventh-day,” of course, referring to the Sabbath, and “Adventist” referring to our belief in the second coming of Christ. At the end of 2009 there were 16,307,880 members worldwide organized into nearly 68,225 churches and 63,800 companies.

“Now Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the prophet, a descendant of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them. Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua son of Jozadak set to work to rebuild the house of God in Jerusalem. And the prophets of God were with them, helping them.”

“As soon as the copy of the letter of King Artaxerxes was read . . . , they went immediately to the Jews in Jerusalem and compelled them by force to stop. Thus the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.”

“King Darius then issued an order, and they searched in the archives stored in the treasury at Babylon.”

“Do not interfere with the work on this temple of God. Let the governor of the Jews and the Jewish elders rebuild this house of God on its site. Moreover, I hereby decree what you are to do for these elders of the Jews in the construction of this house of God: The expenses of these men are to be fully paid out of the royal treasury . . . so that the work will not stop. Whatever is needed . . . must be given them daily without fail, so that they may offer sacrifices pleasing to the God of heaven and pray for the well-being of the king and his sons. Furthermore, I decree that if anyone changes this edict, a beam is to be pulled from his house and he is to be lifted up and impaled on it. And for this crime his house is to be made a pile of rubble. May God, who has caused His Name to dwell there, overthrow any king or people who lift a hand to change this decree or to destroy this temple in Jerusalem. I Darius have decreed it. Let it be carried out with diligence.”

“So the elders of the Jews continued to build and prosper under the preaching of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah, a descendant of Iddo. They finished building the temple according to the command of the God of Israel and the decrees of Cyrus, Darius and Artaxerxes, kings of Persia.”

(Ezra 5:1, 2; 4:23, 24; 6:1, 7-12, 14, NIV)
“But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:15, NIV).

“All the people answered together, ‘Amen! Praise the Lord. Your servant Moses and Aaron have spoken right well.’” (Deuteronomy 33:9, NIV).

“Do not be afraid,” Samuel replied. “You have done all this evil; yet do not turn away from the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart” (1 Samuel 12:20, NIV).

“Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind’” (Matthew 22:37, NIV).

“It seems to me that the dedication of a library is in itself an act of faith. To bring together the records of the past and to house them in buildings where they will be preserved for the use of men and women in the future, a nation must believe in three things. It must believe in the past. It must believe in the future. It must, above all, believe in the capacity of its own people so to learn from the past that they can gain in judgment in creating their own future.”—Franklin D. Roosevelt, United States president (1933-1945), on the occasion of dedicating a facility to maintain the archives of his presidency.


**Sabbath**

Ezra 5:14 talks about the gold and silver utensils taken from the Temple by Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar, which were to be returned to the rebuilt Temple. What do you think the design and accoutrements of a church sanctuary today should include? What does Temple building in Old Testament times and today have to do with stewardship (both in time and resources)? Unity in the body of Christ? Identity as a church? Both? Neither?

**Sunday**

Had you been one of those Temple builders, what would be going through your mind as you felt moved by God to do His work yet were faced with armed resistance? What about verbal resistance, as Noah and Job faced? Rejection by a dear loved one, as Jesus experienced with Peter? The repeated opportunity for sensual pleasure that would pull you away from connection with and service to God, as was offered to Joseph?

**Monday**

This week’s lesson chronicles the efforts of God’s people over time to follow God’s leading in rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem. After initially proceeding with great energy to rebuild the Temple, God’s people in the time of Cyrus lost heart in the face of armed intervention. What terms or conditions would dissuade you from doing God’s work today? Have you ever felt resistance as you sought to serve God from doing God’s work today? Have you ever been involved with an effort to build a church, literally with your labor, perhaps as part of a short-term mission project? What impact did that experience have on you? Have you been or are you part of a project to raise funds for a new church home for your congregation? If so, was or is the congregation fully supportive, or is it divided? The Old Testament Temple builders were guided by prophets, so there was strong evidence of God’s leading. How do we discern God’s leading today?

**Tuesday**

The Flashlight quote taken from Ellen White’s *Prophets and Kings* notes that the Temple builders in the days of Babylonian King Cyrus lost their enthusiasm for following God’s leading in rebuilding the Temple. Has there been a time in your family or church family when people have lost heart after initially following God’s leading? Have you ever been involved with an effort to build a church, literally with your labor, perhaps as part of a short-term mission project? What impact did that experience have on you? Have you been or are you part of a project to raise funds for a new church home for your congregation? If so, was or is the congregation fully supportive, or is it divided? The Old Testament Temple builders were guided by prophets, so there was strong evidence of God’s leading. How do we discern God’s leading today?

**Wednesday**

The word “heart” is seen in the chosen *Punch Lines* as well as in *Flashlight*. The love and service to God noted in these texts are Christian hallmarks. Yet there are times when Christians may lose heart from any number of causes. Indeed, it may be that a Christian has done something truly evil, yet Samuel’s admonition to God’s people of his day to serve the Lord with all their heart remains true for us today. Through God’s grace we are given opportunity to claim His forgiveness for being faint of heart or worse.

**Thursday**

How are you involved with temple building today? That is, what is your response to God’s leading in a very specific matter? Read and reflect upon this remarkable paragraph from page 576 of *Prophets and Kings* that speaks about God’s leading, those who follow in faith, and how He uses us today in His service:

“To His children today the Lord declares, ‘Be strong, . . . and work: for I am with you.’ The Christian always has a strong helper in the Lord. The way of the Lord’s helping we may not know; but this we do know: He will never fail those who put their trust in Him. Could Christians realize how many times the Lord has ordered their way, that the purposes of the enemy concerning them might not be accomplished, they would not stumble along complainingly. Their faith would be stayed on God, and no trial would have power to move them. They would acknowledge Him as their wisdom and efficiency, and He would bring to pass that which He desires to work out through them.”

**Friday**

How do you see yourself as in the lineage of God’s people past and future? In much the same way as a record in an archive provides a tangible link to the past providing information about something that happened, so also do you provide evidence of God’s leading in the present.

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A special adaptation of *Prophets and Kings* has been created just for you by the White Estate and the Pacific Press Publishing Association. Get more info about it at: www.cornerstoneconnections.net. By following this plan you will read at least one book of the Conflict of the Ages Series each year.
“The assaults of Satan are strong, his delusions are subtle; but the Lord’s eye is upon His people. Their affliction is great, the flames of the furnace seem about to consume them; but Jesus will bring them forth as gold tried in the fire. Their earthliness will be removed, that through them the image of Christ may be perfectly revealed” (Prophets and Kings, p. 589).
On a scale from 1 to 10, which of the following challenges would be most difficult (1) to beat, and which would be least challenging (10) to overcome.

- You lose your entire music collection when your iPod breaks.
- Your father loses his job.
- Your application to the college of your choice is denied.
- Your grandfather dies.
- Your parents decide to divorce.
- Your best friend betrays you.
- You get caught shoplifting at the mall.
- You fail the final of your most difficult class.
- Your negligence while driving causes an accident.
- You have a really bad habit that you can’t seem to shake.

**Into the Story**

“In the eighth month of the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Zechariah son of Berekiah, the son of Iddo: ‘The Lord was very angry with your forefathers. Therefore tell the people: This is what the Lord Almighty says: “Return to me,” declares the Lord Almighty, “and I will return to you,” says the Lord Almighty.

“Do not be like your forefathers, to whom the earlier prophets proclaimed: This is what the Lord Almighty says: “Turn from your evil ways and your evil practices. But they would not listen or pay attention to me,” declares the Lord. “Where are your forefathers now? And the prophets, do they live forever? But did not my words and my decrees, which I commanded my servants the prophets, overtake your forefathers?”

“Then they repented and said, “The Lord Almighty has done to us what our ways and practices deserve, just as he determined to do.””

“Shout and be glad, O Daughter of Zion. For I am coming, and I will live among you,” declares the Lord. “Many nations will be joined with the Lord in that day and will become my people. I will live among you and you will know that the Lord Almighty has sent me to you.”

“Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him. The Lord said to Satan, ‘The Lord rebuke you, Satan! The Lord, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?’

“Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. The angel said to those who were standing before him, ‘Take off his filthy clothes.’ Then he said to Joshua, ‘See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you.’ Then I said, ‘Put a clean turban on his head.’ So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him, while the angel of the Lord stood by.

“The angel of the Lord gave this charge to Joshua: ‘This is what the Lord Almighty says: “If you will walk in my ways and keep my requirements, then you will govern my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you a place among these standing here.’”

(Zechariah 1:1-6; 2:10, 11; 3:1-7, NIV)
“Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: ‘Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down’” (Revelation 12:10, NIV).

“Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you” (Acts 13:38, NIV).

“Praise be to the Lord, who has given rest to his people Israel just as he promised. Not one word has failed of all the good promises he gave through his servant Moses” (1 Kings 8:56, NIV).

“Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine” (Exodus 19:5, NIV).

“Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered” (Psalm 32:1, NIV).

“Forgiveness is the answer to the child’s dream of a miracle by which what is broken is made whole again, what is soiled is made clean again.”—Dag Hammarskjold, 1961 Nobel Peace Prize winner, Secretary General of the United Nations.

“The cure for all ills and wrongs, the cares, the sorrows, and the crimes of humanity, all lie in the one word ‘love.’ It is the divine vitality that everywhere produces and restores life.”—Lydia Maria Child, abolitionist, women’s rights activist, novelist, journalist.
Sabbath

Were the items in the What Do You Think? section difficult to rank? Recovering from a major setback is never easy. This was the challenge the people of Judah faced after spending 70 years as captives in Babylon.

Why did God allow Judah to be captured by the Babylonians? (Zechariah 1:4-6)

When the mighty Persian kingdom defeated Babylon, the Jews were freed. A small group of them decided to return home to Jerusalem. List three major obstacles that you think they would have had to overcome to rebuild and resettle their destroyed homeland.

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Sunday

After reading the Into the Story section, explore the passage using the Out of the Story prompts. The book of Zechariah is made up of several visions that God gives Zechariah to encourage the remnant of Judah that returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the ancient Temple that was destroyed by Babylon.

Read Zechariah 2:10. Put yourself in the shoes of one of the returning members of Judah. Write a sentence expressing how these words would make you feel.

__________________________

Monday

This Sabbath’s Key Text makes it clear that God stood ready to return to the people of Judah, but Judah had a part to play in the process. What do you think God meant when He said to Judah, “Return to me”?

Many of God’s promises to His people are conditional. Read Exodus 19:1-8. What did God promise to do? What did the people of Israel—of which the tribe of Judah was a part—promise to do?

Tuesday

God was not the only Being who reminded Judah of the sins that led it into Babylonian captivity. Satan “accused” them before God. The Bible calls Satan the “accuser of our brethren” (Revelation 12:10, KJV).

Why do you think that Satan proceeded to charge Judah before God? Let’s make it more personal. Why does He make accusations about you to God? Satan’s plan is to separate all human beings from God’s love and fellowship, and He uses our sins to try to convince God that we are not worth saving.

What ray of hope does this week’s Flashlight shine on our humbling condition?

Wednesday

Take a look at this week’s Punch Lines. This week’s Scripture painted a picture of sin’s devastating effects. While in vision, Zechariah saw Joshua, the high priest of Judah, dressed in filthy, tattered clothes—something that God would never tolerate, especially for a priest. Joshua’s manner of dress symbolized Israel’s degraded spiritual condition.

How does God go about fixing this condition? Do you think Psalm 32:1 accurately captures how you feel when God forgives you of sin? Explain

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Thursday

Think of a time in your life when you felt abandoned by God. Perhaps it was after you failed a test, or committed a sin that you’d vowed never to do again. How did you deal with the feeling of separation from God? When you were abandoned by God, how can the Bible help you reconnect with Him? What role can friends play in helping you to hook up with God again?

On a 3 x 5 index card, finish this statement:
Whenever I feel far away from God I will . . .

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__________________________

Friday

If you will walk in my ways and keep my requirements, then you will govern my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you a place among these standing here” (Zechariah 3:7, NIV). Those are the words that the angel of God spoke to Joshua in Jeremiah’s dream. God promised Joshua and Judah a place in His kingdom, provided that they remained obedient to His requests.

In what area of your life are you struggling to obey God? Stop right now and pray, asking God to give you the willingness and strength to obey Him.

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this week’s reading*

Prophets and Kings, chapter 47.

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flashlight

“Throughout the history of God’s people great mountains of difficulty, apparently insurmountable, have loomed up before those who were trying to carry out the purposes of Heaven. Such obstacles are permitted by the Lord as a test of faith. When we are hedged about on every side, this is the time above all others to trust in God and in the power of His Spirit. The exercise of a living faith means an increase of spiritual strength and the development of an unflagging trust” (Prophets and Kings, pp. 594, 595).

keytext

“In the first year of King Cyrus, the king issued a decree concerning the temple of God in Jerusalem: Let the temple be rebuilt as a place to present sacrifices, and let its foundations be laid.”

(Ezra 6:3, NIV)
Everyone needs encouragement. Wouldn’t you agree?

According to Eboni Baugh, Ph.D., the following are five things that parents can do to encourage their teens—you—to feel better about themselves. (OK, don’t gag!) Rank the following parental support tips in order of their importance to you on a scale from 1 to 5 (1—Gotta Have It to 5—Whatever!).

1. Take time to listen to you.
2. Help you set goals for your life.
3. Compliment you regularly.
4. Be a positive role model.
5. Try out one of your favorite activities, or participate in something that you want to do.

How does God encourage us during difficult times?

“...the king issued a decree concerning the temple of God in Jerusalem: Let the temple be rebuilt as a place to present sacrifices, and let its foundations be laid. It is to be ninety feet high and ninety feet wide, with three courses of large stones and one of timbers. The costs are to be paid by the royal treasury. Also, the gold and silver articles of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took from the temple in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, are to be returned to their places in the temple in Jerusalem; they are to be deposited in the house of God..."

“Moreover, I hereby decree what you are to do for these elders of the Jews in the construction of this house of God: The expenses of these men are to be fully paid out of the royal treasury, from the revenues of Trans-Euphrates, so that the work will not stop. Whatever is needed—young bulls, rams, male lambs for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, and wheat, salt, wine and oil, as requested by the priests in Jerusalem—must be given them daily without fail, so that they may offer sacrifices pleasing to the God of heaven and pray for the well-being of the king and his sons.”

“...and I will be its glory within.”

(Ezra 6:3-5, 8-10; Zechariah 2:1-5, NIV)
The Scripture story for this week splices together the messages of two separate prophets who are writing about the same event—the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem.

What do you find unique about Ezra’s message, the first part of Into the Story?

What do you find interesting about Zechariah’s message?

Underline the promises of God that you find in these scriptures.

How did God help smooth the way for the rebuilding process? How did He help the returning exiles?

What do you think God meant when He stated that Jerusalem would be a city without walls, that He Himself would be a wall of fire around it? Here’s a hint: Consider why ancient cities erected huge walls.

God said that He would be Jerusalem’s glory within. What do you think He meant?

What do these passages tell us about God’s love for humanity?

OUT OF THE STORY

"What are you, O mighty mountain? Before Zerubbabel you will become level ground. Then he will bring out the capstone to shouts of ‘God bless it! God bless it!’” (Zechariah 4:7, NIV).

“So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’” (Hebrews 13:6, NIV).

“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea” (Psalm 46:1, 2, NIV).

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband” (Revelation 21:1, 2, NIV).

"So he said to me, ‘This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the Lord Almighty” (Zechariah 4:6, NIV).

"If you wish success in life, make perseverance your bosom friend, experience your wise counselor, caution your elder brother and hope your guardian genius.”—Joseph Addison, English essayist, poet, and politician.

"The chief obstacle to the progress of the human race is the human race.”—Don Marquis, 19th-20th-century U.S. columnist, playwright, humorist.

"It is difficult to make a man miserable while he feels worthy of himself and claims kindred to the great God who made him.”—Abraham Lincoln, 16th president of the United States.
**Sabbath**

Whether you care to admit it or not, some of the items in the *What Do You Think?* ranking list are essential to your well-being, to your ability not to merely survive, but thrive.

Read Ezra 6:3-5 and think carefully about the following question: If something happened to your church, perhaps a fire that destroyed the entire structure, how would it impact you and the other members of the congregation?

_________________________________

_________________________________

Now think about how the church would react if a wealthy neighbor in the community decided to rebuild the church at their own expense. Write one word to describe how you would feel.

_________________________________

How do you think the people of God felt when they heard the decree to help them rebuild the Temple?

_________________________________ 

**Sunday**

After reading the *Into the Story* and completing the *Out of the Story* questions, what is new to you in these passages?

When Zechariah saw in vision the man (angel) with the measuring line going over to measure Jerusalem’s dimensions, almost immediately another angel arrived on the scene to stop the man from measuring Jerusalem. Why? Because the people and livestock of Jerusalem would overflow whatever boundaries were erected.

Do you think this promise of a new and beautiful Jerusalem bears any connection to the new Jerusalem described in Revelation 21? Explain.

_________________________________

**Monday**

Read this week’s *Key Text* again. The decree to allow the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem by the newly freed people of Judah was no small blessing.

What did the enemies of Judah do to try to discourage Zerubbabel and his citizen workforce? (See Ezra 4:1-5.)

_________________________________

How do you stay focused on doing what God tells you to do when others are disregarding His commands? How does God help you during these challenges?

**Tuesday**

This week’s *Flashlight* quotation highlights the importance of trusting God through difficult circumstances. A little later in this same chapter of *Prophets and Kings*, Ellen White makes a very powerful statement that one might easily overlook. She writes: “The way of the world is to begin with pomp and boasting. God’s way is to make the day of small things the beginning of the glorious triumph of truth and righteousness” (p. 595).

In your own words, write what you think she means by this statement.

_________________________________

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**Wednesday**

Read this week’s *Punch Lines*. The first *Punch Line* scripture is one of the most powerful verses in all the Bible. Who is the speaker in Zechariah 4:7? What is the unmistakable message that God wants to deliver to Zerubbabel and all of Judah?

What often-quoted verse precedes Zechariah 4:7? What point do you think God was making to Zerubbabel, Zerubbabel, and Judah?

These two verses remind us that God is truly the “author” and “finisher” of our faith, and everything else in our lives.

**Thursday**

The remnant of the tribe of Judah that returned from Babylonian captivity was small and seemingly insignificant. That is one of the reasons why the surrounding nations targeted them for destruction once they saw them rebuilding the Temple of their God.

On Monday you read Ezra 4:1-5. Why is it that the righteous seem to experience more trials when trying to do what’s right than people who are committing open sin? This is a question that many Bible writers asked, and many still struggle to find an answer today.

**Friday**

God promised Judah protection as they rebuilt the Temple, as well as the resources needed to do it. Think about your future, your life, where you want to be in, say, 10 to 15 years. What would you like God to do for you as you “build” your life?

Now read Matthew 7:24-27. Reflect for a moment on this question: On what foundation are you building your house—your life?

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**this week’s reading**

*Prophets and Kings*, chapter 48.

A special adaptation of *Prophets and Kings* has been created just for you by the White Estate and the Pacific Press Publishing Association. Get more info about it at www.cornerstoneconnections.net. By following this plan you will read at least one book of the Conflict of the Ages Series each year.

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“The trying experiences that came to God’s people in the days of Esther were not peculiar to that age alone. The revelator, looking down the ages to the close of time, has declared, ‘The dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.’ Revelation 12:17. Some who today are living on the earth will see these words fulfilled” (Prophets and Kings, p. 605).
If a gunman were at your school, looked you in the eye, and said, “All Christians die today. Are you a Christian?” and then added, “But if you tell me who the other Christians are, I’ll let you go,” what would be your response?

___ Yes, I’m a Christian, but I won’t give you the names of other Christians.
___ No, I’m not a Christian, but here are the names anyhow.
___ Yes, I’m a Christian, and here are the names of my Christian friends.
___ No, I’m not a Christian.
___ Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

Christian martyrs are people who willingly give up their life because they refuse to renounce their faith. Most of today’s Christian martyrs are unnamed. It’s easy to remember martyrs from the Bible days and from centuries ago; however, most of today’s martyrs we may never hear about. In the story of Esther we will learn how she trusted in God and put her faith in Him, even though she knew she could perish. She knew that she must put her faith in her Creator in order to keep her people and their faith from being destroyed. God was with her and He gave her the strength to face the king. She went before the king even though she knew it might end her life. It is this kind of faith that has been placed in the hearts of millions, even when face-to-face with death.

"After these events, King Xerxes honored Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, elevating him and giving him a seat of honor higher than that of all the other nobles. All the royal officials at the king’s gate knelt down and paid honor to Haman, for the king had commanded this concerning him. But Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor.

"When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor, he was enraged.

"Then Haman said to King Xerxes, ‘There is a certain people dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom whose customs are different from those of all other people and who do not obey the king’s laws; it is not in the king’s best interest to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will put ten thousand talents of silver into the royal treasury for the men who carry out this business.’

"So the king took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. ‘Keep the money,’ the king said to Haman, ‘and do with the people as you please.’"

"When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. But he went only as far as the king’s gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it.

"When Esther’s maids and eunuchs came and told her about Mordecai, she was in great distress.

"Then Esther summoned Hathach, one of the king’s eunuchs assigned to attend her, and ordered him to find out what was troubling Mordecai and why.

"Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews.

"Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: ‘Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.’

"So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther’s instructions.”

(Esther 3:1, 2, 5, 8-11; 4:1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 15-17, NIV)
In what way did Esther demonstrate true faith in Jesus Christ?

What was Haman’s reaction toward Mordecai when he found out that he would not bow down before him?

What was the driving force that caused Esther to go and put her life on the line?

What do you think made Haman so eager to persecute the Jews?

Why do you think King Xerxes listened to Haman and granted him his wish?

Name some ways in which Esther can be an example to us and how we put our faith in God.

What do you think someone would have done in Esther’s place if they had no trust in God?

What would you have done if you were in Esther’s place?

“Faith is to believe what you do not see; the reward of this faith is to see what you believe.” —Saint Augustine, 4th-5th-century church father; bishop of Hippo.

“Take the first step in faith. You don’t have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step.” —Martin Luther King, Jr., 20th-century U.S. clergyman and civil rights activist.

Sabbath

A lot of us probably look at Esther’s amazing leap of faith and wonder what we would do if we were put in that situation. It has to do with trust in God. If we put our lives in His hands and commit ourselves to Him fully, He will give us the strength to stand up and do the right thing. Trust is what we need. We must not trust in the things of this world, but give ourselves entirely to the Lord Jesus Christ and He will lead us through our trials, sorrows, and paths of life with a steady hand.

List five situations in your life in which you’ve demonstrated faith in Jesus Christ.
1. ____________________________________
2. ____________________________________
3. ____________________________________
4. ____________________________________
5. ____________________________________

Sunday

God will always be by our side, whether we feel Him there or not. Sometimes we are so caught up in our own lives and problems that we forget that it’s Him we should depend on, and not ourselves. At times when we think that God has abandoned us and has left us cold and desolate in this world, we should stop and think that maybe it’s we who have abandoned Him. Can you think of such a time in your life? When did you realize that it wasn’t He who left you, but you who left Him? If we commit ourselves to Him and put faith in Him, then He will never be absent in our lives.

Monday

In the book of Esther, she is quoted saying, “Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.” It is this kind of faith that is key in our relationship with God. She knew that whether she lived or perished, God was by her side. It was that faith that drove her to see the king. It was through that faith that God helped her save her people from being destroyed. You may not be faced with Esther’s exact problems, but how can you try to put faith in God in the big and little things in your life?

Tuesday

The Flashlight quote reminds us that one day we may all be faced with a life-and-death situation because of our faith. We might be persecuted and despised. We might be hunted down and sought after. However, sometimes to gain life you must give up life. To die for Christ is to live for Him. We must realize that people can kill or scar our bodies, but because of our faith in Jesus, we will have eternal life—and nobody can take that away.

Wednesday

We must not lean on our own understanding but lean on God and His Word. Often we think we know the answer to a problem we are having, or we think we can solve it with our cleverness. But unlike us, God sees the whole picture. He knows what will happen and what we should do. He sees the situation better than we see it.

Read through the entire book of Esther and try to find more examples of faith and trust. Write down three of them that could apply to your life.
1. ____________________________________
2. ____________________________________
3. ____________________________________

Thursday

What are some trials, whether big or small, that you’ve gone through and put your faith wholeheartedly in God?

Friday

If your life was ever put on the line in order to defend your faith or the faith of others, what would you say to your persecutors? Write down three different sentences.
1. ____________________________________
2. ____________________________________
3. ____________________________________

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1, KJV).
“The trying experiences that came to God’s people in the days of Esther were not peculiar to that age alone. . . . The same spirit that in ages past led men to persecute the true church will in the future lead to the pursuance of a similar course toward those who maintain their loyalty to God. Even now preparations are being made for this last great conflict. . . . And we are not left in doubt as to the issue. Today, as in the days of Esther and Mordecai, the Lord will vindicate His truth and His people” (Prophets and Kings, pp. 605, 606).

“Then the king asked, ‘What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you.’”

(Esther 5:3, NIV)
When I get something I really want, I
____ can’t believe this is happening.
____ am grateful to God and anyone who helped me.
____ am proud of myself.
____ usually do something to mess it up.

in the ancient world, defeated enemies usually suffered a terrible fate. Prisoners of war could be expected either to be killed or taken as slaves, although wealthy and important prisoners might sometimes be ransomed—returned to their homes in exchange for money and land. Very few were so lucky. Defeated enemies might be tortured, hanged, drawn and quartered, beheaded, crucified, or burned, depending on the technology and the traditions of the enemy who defeated them.

The Bible tells us that after Esther informed the king that she was a potential victim of Haman’s plot, Haman was hanged on the gallows he’d built for Mordecai. Later, Esther demanded that Haman’s 10 sons be hanged as well—it was common for victors to wipe out the families of their enemies as well, so that no one could survive to carry on a blood feud.

As Christians, we’re told to love our enemies. How does the idea of getting revenge on a defeated enemy fit with Jesus’ idea of forgiveness? What kind of “victory” does God promise us?

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esther said, ‘the adversary and enemy is this vile haman.’

‘then haman was terrified before the king and queen. the king got up in a rage, left his wine and went out into the palace garden. but haman, realizing that the king had already decided his fate, stayed behind to beg queen esther for his life.

‘just as the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, haman was falling on the couch where esther was reclining. the king exclaimed, ‘will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house?’

‘as soon as the word left the king’s mouth, they covered haman’s face. then harbona, one of the eunuchs attending the king, said, ‘a gallows seventy-five feet high stands by haman’s house. he had it made for mordecai, who spoke up to help the king.’

‘the king said, ‘hang him on it!’ so they hanged haman on the gallows he had prepared for mordecai. then the king’s fury subsided.’

(esther 7, niv)
“Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:57, NIV).

“In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:37-39, NIV).

“With God we will gain the victory, and he will trample down our enemies” (Psalm 60:12, NIV).

“Everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith” (1 John 5:4, NIV).

“To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne” (Revelation 3:21, NIV).

“After the cheers have died down and the stadium is empty, after the headlines have been written and after you are back in the quiet of your room and the championship ring has been placed on the dresser and all the pomp and fanfare has faded, the enduring things that are left are: the dedication to excellence, the dedication to victory, and the dedication to doing with our lives the very best we can to make the world a better place in which to live.” —Vince Lombardi, 20th-century U.S. football coach.
**Sabbath**

Look back at the *What Do You Think?* section, then at the Bible verses under *Punch Lines*. Throughout the Bible God promises us victory. In some Bible stories, such as the story of Esther, this means victory over a literal enemy who’s threatening us. Do you have enemies such as that?

For many Christians today God’s promise of victory means victory over temptations, sin, and trials in our lives. Where would you like to see victory in your life today?

Think about one time in your life when God gave you victory in a tough situation. How did you react?

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**Sunday**

Read through the *Into the Story* Bible passage and the questions that follow it. As you read the scene, imagine yourself in the role of each of the three players: Esther, Haman, and the king. What are the sights, sounds, tastes, and smells that surround you at Esther’s banquet? What would you be feeling as the evening unfolds?

Choose one of the three characters and write a paragraph describing how you think that person would feel at the moment Esther accuses Haman of plotting to kill her people.

---

**Monday**

What would you do if a king offered you anything “up to half the kingdom”? This over-the-top offer King Xerxes made to Esther was an exaggeration—intended to show the king’s generosity.

But the King of heaven, our Father, really does make extravagant promises. Read Ephesians 3:20. What does it tell us about God’s promises?

---

**Tuesday**

If you walked into the throne room of heaven and God offered you more than you could even ask or imagine, what would you ask Him for?

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**Wednesday**

Read the Bible verses in the *Punch Lines* section. Each of them is a promise of victory. Choose your favorite promise from this list (or another Bible verse you like about God giving us victory) and create a poster of it that you can display in your room, near your computer, or anywhere you look at often. Use it as a reminder that God is powerful enough to give you victory over any kind of “enemy” you face.

---

**Thursday**

Our “enemies” could be actual people—maybe a bully who picks on us, or someone who stands in the way of doing what we know is right. More often, the enemies we fight are spiritual, and they take root within our own lives—temptations and trials that we have to overcome. Read Romans 8:31-39 and Ephesians 6:10-12 to see what kinds of battles we fight as Christians, and what kind of victory God promises.

Think about a battle that you’re engaged in on the spiritual level right now. God promises victory, but He often asks us for courageous action—just like He asked of Esther. What’s one thing you could do today to move toward the victory God has in store for you in this situation?

---

**Friday**

Sometimes when you’re in a crisis situation, such as Esther was, it’s difficult to have faith that God will give you victory. Reflecting on Bible stories and other experiences in which God has triumphed can build our faith. As you think about your own “battle” situation (see yesterday’s section), what stories of faith—from the Bible, from people you know, or from your own experience—encourage you and give you inspiration? Reflect on those stories and remember that though it may take awhile, God always promises victory!

---

leading them home

flashlight

“Born of the sons of Aaron, Ezra had been given a priestly training; and in addition to this he had acquired a familiarity with the writings of the magicians, the astrologers, and the wise men of the Medo-Persian realm. But he was not satisfied with his spiritual condition. He longed to be in full harmony with God; he longed for wisdom to carry out the divine will. And so he ‘prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it.’ Ezra 7:10. This led him to apply himself diligently to a study of the history of God’s people, as recorded in the writings of prophets and kings. He searched the historical and poetical books of the Bible to learn why the Lord had permitted Jerusalem to be destroyed and His people carried captive into a heathen land” (Prophets and Kings, p. 608).

keytext

“For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.”

(Ezra 7:10, NIV)
Do you like coming home? There is nothing like coming home after a long time away. You can imagine what it would have felt like to go home after all that time. How do you feel after being away from home? Are you happy to return? hesitant? unsure?

About 40,000 Israelites went home with Ezra during this period. This was not the entire nation of Israel, but it was a significant number. The question of why some didn’t go home should be looked at. Perhaps, as we see later on in the text, it is because of the intermarrying that the Israelites became so fond of during this time. Perhaps it was because of their lengthy captivity that they had become so comfortable in a foreign land that they couldn’t see themselves leaving. Do you think you would have stayed or left?

“After these things, during the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiah, the son of Shallum, the son of Zadok, the son of Ahitub, the son of Amariah, the son of Azariah, the son of Meraioth, the son of Zerahiah, the son of Uzzi, the son of Bukki, the son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest—this Ezra came up from Babylon. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the Lord, the God of Israel, had given. The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the Lord his God was on him. For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel. . . .

“Now I decree that any of the Israelites in my kingdom, including priests and Levites, who wish to go to Jerusalem with you, may go. You are sent by the king and his seven advisers to inquire about Judah and Jerusalem with regard to the Law of your God, which is in your hand. Moreover, you are to take with you the silver and gold that the king and his advisers have freely given to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, together with all the silver and gold you may obtain from the province of Babylon, as well as the freewill offerings of the people and priests for the temple of their God in Jerusalem. With this money be sure to buy bulls, rams and male lambs, together with their grain offerings and drink offerings, and sacrifice them on the altar of the temple of your God in Jerusalem.

“You and your brother Jews may then do whatever seems best with the rest of the silver and gold, in accordance with the will of your God. Deliver to the God of Jerusalem all the articles entrusted to you for worship in the temple of your God. And anything else needed for the temple of your God that you may have occasion to supply, you may provide from the royal treasury.”

(Ezra 7:1-10, 13-18, NIV)
“Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ” (Acts 5:42, NIV).

“Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Hebrews 4:13, NIV).

“Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life” (Proverbs 4:23, NIV).

“Now set your mind and heart to seek the Lord your God. Arise and build the sanctuary of the Lord God” (1 Chronicles 22:19, ESV).

“Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” (1 Corinthians 3:16, NKJV).

“There is always the danger that we may just do the work for the sake of the work. This is where the respect and the love and the devotion come in—that we do it to God, to Christ, and that’s why we try to do it as beautifully as possible.”—Mother Teresa, 20th-century Albanian Roman Catholic nun known for her humanitarian work in India.

“Leadership is the capacity to translate vision into reality.”—Warren G. Bennis, current U.S. scholar, author, organizational consultant.
Sabbath
Coming home is always an interesting thing. Sometimes it is sweet, sometimes it is bitter. The city of Jerusalem was probably still in ruins at the time Ezra was given permission to take whoever wanted to go back to Israel. This would have made the coming home a bit bitter. However, they were no longer to be foreigners in a foreign country, so that had to be sweet.

It is important to realize that Ezra’s leadership abilities were pretty important here. He had to convince those Israelites that were becoming more and more comfortable in Babylon, a city of incomparable riches, that they should go home to the rubble that was Jerusalem. That could not have been an easy task. Not only that, when he got the group together, there were no people from the tribe of Levi, which were very important to have, and so he had to go back and convince them. He could have done this only if he had trained himself to listen to God and to pray at every turn.

In what ways has God placed you in a position to influence those around you?

Monday
Ezra is the key to this story. The Key Text says that he was committed not only to knowing the law, but to keeping it as well. This is where the rubber meets the road when it comes to believing in God. Do we do what we know He wants us to? If not, why not? Do we even care about what He is asking us to do? Ezra cared! Not only did Ezra care, but he moved as soon as he was asked to move. He became what God needed him to be—a leader—and helped change the course of history.

Tuesday
But he was not satisfied with his spiritual condition. . . .” This Flashlight quote is important to the reading of this whole text and in understanding the kind of person Ezra was. We oftentimes realize that something is wrong with our spirituality. We often think that we understand what we are supposed to do. However, are we so “not satisfied” that we will actually move in the direction that God is asking us to move? Are we truly seeking to know the will of God by becoming students of Scripture and people of action when it comes to His will?

Wednesday
The Punch Lines this week spoke specifically about why we do what we do, and about our hearts. Ezra prepared his heart by making a decision to love God and seek His will. The decision came and the rest followed. Perhaps this is a good model for us.

The quote from Mother Teresa speaks to our motivation of why we do things. The reality is that once our hearts are prepared, we become more and more in tune with what God wants and how we can fulfill His will in our lives. If Ezra could move a country’s worth of people, in what ways can we move ourselves?

Thursday
Have you decided to move your heart to know the Scriptures, seek God’s will, and lead others to Him? It’s a big question, with another question in tow: “How?” The first thing to do is to ask God into your life and ask Him to make His presence known. Then search the Scriptures to see where God is talking to you. After this, it is simply a matter of movement, in order to live what you know to be true.

Friday
Does God have a plan for you? Absolutely! It is the same plan for us all: to be together with one another again soon. He seeks reunion with all of us, and with you as well! Ask yourself this question: “How can I be a leader like Ezra for You, Lord?”

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this week’s reading*
Prophets and Kings, chapters 50, 51.

After having read the Out of the Story questions, do you think that you could have been a leader like Ezra? Could you have disciplined yourself enough in order to listen to God and make His will the desire of your heart? The task that Ezra was taking was a huge task, and one that could easily have failed. What do you do when you have a difficult task to complete? Do you bring God into the equation? Explain.

Out of the Story
Do you bring God into the equation? Explain.

Out of the Story
What do you think Ezra would have done differently had he not been a leader like Ezra?

Out of the Story
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Out of the Story
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Nehemiah, the kneeologian

“To pray as Nehemiah prayed in his hour of need is a resource at the command of the Christian under circumstances when other forms of prayer may be impossible. Toilers in the busy walks of life, crowded and almost overwhelmed with perplexity, can send up a petition to God for divine guidance” (Prophets and Kings, p. 631).

keytext

“O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.”

(Nehemiah 1:11, NIV)
Either/Or
The experience of praying is more meaningful to me when I pray... individually or with others.
What do you think are the kinds of things we ought to pray for individually in contrast to the things we should pray for corporately?

There are two types of “ask” used in the Greek language:
Ask (aiteo) refers to asking as an inferior to a superior.
Ask (eratao) refers to asking as an equal with authority.

What difference does it make? Read John 14:14 (aiteo), and 16 (eratao), and think about how this might change the way you pray.

“The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah: In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem. They said to me, ‘Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.’

“When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. Then I said: ‘O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, let your ear be attentive

and your eyes open
to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

“Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, “If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.” They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.”

(Nehemiah 1:1-11, NIV)
What is the key problem that prompts Nehemiah to pray?

Who are the “remnant” in this passage? Why are they described this way?

Underline the words and phrases that convey the emotions that Nehemiah felt.

What other characters in Scripture might understand Nehemiah’s burden? Explain.

Examine the prayer of Nehemiah and identify key parts that you think might be important.

What do you think is the “covenant of love” referred to in verse 5?

In verse 11, what specifically does Nehemiah pray for? (You may have to read ahead in your Bible.)

What is the message God has for you in this story?

punch lines

“But if from there you seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul. When you are in distress and all these things have happened to you, then in later days you will return to the Lord your God and obey him. For the Lord your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your forefathers, which he confirmed to them by oath” (Deuteronomy 4:29-31, NIV).

“Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you” (Jeremiah 29:12, NIV).

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; and he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened” (Matthew 7:7, 8, NIV).

“Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective” (James 5:16, NIV).

“What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us?” (Romans 8:31, NLT).

“Those who always pray are necessary to those who never pray.”—Victor Hugo, 19th-century French poet, novelist, dramatist.

“Do you know what is wrong with the world today? There’s too much theologian and not enough kneelogian.”—Dallas F. Billington, 19th-century U.S. preacher.

“A man who wants to lead the orchestra must turn his back on the crowd.”—Max Lucado, current U.S. Christian author.
Sabbath
As you respond to the What Do You Think? section of this week’s lesson, read a portion of a letter from Paul in Philippians 1:3-5. How does Nehemiah’s prayer for help for his people compare with Paul’s? How are they alike? How are they different? What do you think it is easier to pray for, mundane ordinary things or great and miraculous events? Why?

Tuesday
In this week’s Flashlight quote from Prophets and Kings, Ellen White encourages Christians to pray in whatever way is feasible to have a conversation with God. Whom do you know that is a champion of prayer? How have you seen their prayer life impact the well-being of others?

Wednesday
Read the Punch Lines in this week’s lesson and rank them (1—the most and 5—the least) according to the way they speak personally to you. Which passage, if acted on, would transform your spiritual life the most? Why? Choose one verse in the Punch Lines and talk to God about how you might live out that message today.

Thursday
In this week’s lesson Nehemiah prays to God for help from a king. Throughout history God has used many who don’t even believe in Him to be instruments in His plan. How do you see God using various events, people, and situations around the world to continue His work throughout the world? Nehemiah’s desire is earnest and single-minded. What three things do you think God would have us be “single-minded” about as a church? Why are they important? Begin to pray deliberately and specifically for these things to happen, and be willing to do whatever it takes to be part of the answer.

Friday
Think about the times in your life when prayer has been especially helpful. There are times when God brings comfort and peace, but there are also times when God helps you get good things done in His name. Take time to thank God for His actions in the past as well as for His promises in the future.

Thank You, Lord, for the times in the past when You answered my prayers by

Thank You, Lord, for Your promises for the future that you will

this week’s reading*
Prophets and Kings, chapter 52.
“Nehemiah’s whole soul was in the enterprise he had undertaken. His hope, his energy, his enthusiasm, his determination were contagious, inspiring others with the same high courage and lofty purpose. Each man became a Nehemiah in his turn and helped to make stronger the heart and hand of his neighbor” (Prophets and Kings, p. 638).
Some leaders are “visionaries” and some leaders are “doers” but a rare few have to some degree the capacity to do both. Choose the approach to which you tend to ascribe and why you think it might be good. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of both.

- “Work hard at what you know is right and God will accompany your efforts.”
  OR
- “Pray first and wait for God to guide you in what you should do.”

Everyone put on your happy face!” Did you know that in ancient times you could be executed for appearing depressed in the presence of the king? Monarchs must appear to inspire joy and happiness in their subjects, no matter what! Or else!

Fortunately, our King is secure in Himself and, thus, calls us to bring not only our joys into His presence but our burdens and sorrows as well!

“I was cupbearer to the king.”

“In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before; so the king asked me, ‘Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart.’ I was very much afraid, but I said to the king, ‘May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?’

“The king said to me, ‘What is it you want?’ Then I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, ‘If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it.’

“Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, ‘How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?’ It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time. I also said to him, ‘If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah? And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king’s forest, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?’ And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests.

“So I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates and gave them the king’s letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me.

“When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites.

“I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days I set out during the night with a few men. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on.”

(Nehemiah 1:11; 2:1-12, NIV)
“O Lord, lead me in Your righteousness because of my foes; make Your way straight before me” (Psalm 5:8, NASB).

“Prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was” (James 1:22-24, NASB).

“Lead me in Your truth and teach me, for You are the God of my salvation; for You I wait all the day” (Psalm 25:5, NASB).

“I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go; I will counsel you with My eye upon you” (Psalm 32:8, NASB).

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight” (Proverbs 3:5, 6, NASB).

“The Christian way is not the middle way between extremes, but the narrow way between precipices.”
—Donald Bloesch, current U.S. evangelical theologian.

“If you are successful, it becomes possible for you to leave an inheritance for others. But if you desire to create a legacy, then you need to leave something in others. When you think unselfishly and invest in others, you gain the opportunity to create a legacy that will outlive you.”—John Maxwell, current U.S. expert on leadership.
Sabbath

As you respond to the What Do You Think? section of this week’s lesson, consider what Peter says in his letter to the church: “Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Peter 1:13, NIV). How does this passage capture Nehemiah’s ability to see what needs to be done and find the right way to do the work God has set before him?

In what sphere of influence do you have the power to make a difference today?

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Sunday

Read the passage in the Into the Story section of the student lesson and respond to the study questions provided. Take time to imagine the scenes and sounds of the king’s courtroom. How important do you think Nehemiah was to the king and what characteristics did he have that the king might have valued? What do you think is the message God has for you in this story? Is there a particular area of your life in which you need to be like Nehemiah and take prayerful action?

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Monday

Consider the simple message in the Key Text in this week’s lesson in which Nehemiah states; “I was cupbearer to the king” (Nehemiah 1:11, NIV). This may seem like a humble admission of a simple job, but the cupbearer was a trusted servant as well as a consultant and protector of the king. Sometimes we describe ourselves by our position or our pedigree, or even by who we are related to. But Nehemiah’s post is key to understanding the story. Who we are is not always what we do or who we are related to, but there are times when our role has influence.

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Tuesday

In this week’s Flashlight quote from Prophets and Kings, Ellen White draws attention to the single-minded passion of Nehemiah. Clearly, Nehemiah became committed to a cause that inspired others to embrace it with enthusiasm. This leadership skill is born out of a genuine conviction and goes well beyond just a good idea. Nehemiah was willing to risk his life for this cause. What cause do you believe in so much that you might be willing to risk your life for it?

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Wednesday

Read the Punch Lines in this week’s lesson and identify the one passage that is speaking to you today. Why do you think this Scripture pricks your heart now and how does it speak to your life? Is there a particular verse in the Punch Lines that you want to share with a friend?

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Thursday

Who do you know that has seen a cause through to fruition? Take time to write a note of affirmation and encouragement to someone in your church or community who has worked hard to see an idea through to reality. Share with them how they are like Nehemiah and what a contribution this makes to others and say a prayer that the same spirit will grow in you.

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Friday

As you reflect on this part of Nehemiah’s story, what fears or questions do you have about your own abilities that inhibit your willingness to take risks for God? How do the stories of all the believers who have gone before you that took risks for God’s cause give you courage? What would a similar course in your own journey look like?

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*This week’s reading*

Prophets and Kings, chapter 53.

A special adaptation of Prophets and Kings has been created just for you by the White Estate and the Pacific Press Publishing Association. Get more info about it at: www.cornerstoneconnections.net. By following this plan you will read at least one book of the Conflict of the Ages Series each year.
getting it right

flashlight

“We were all debtors to divine justice, but we had nothing with which to pay the debt. The Son of God, who pitied us, paid the price of our redemption. He became poor that through His poverty we might be rich. By deeds of liberality toward His poor we may prove the sincerity of our gratitude for the mercy extended to us” (Prophets and Kings, p. 652).

keytext

“Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our countrymen and though our sons are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. . . . we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others.' When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry.”

(Nehemiah 5:5, 6, NIV)
what do you think?

We should devote ourselves to acts of kindness and good deeds especially to believers or nonbelievers? Explain your answer.

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Read Galatians 6:10 and consider whether you think what Paul is asking is backwards or right on. Why?

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ighty-five percent of “outsiders” describe churchgoers as “hypocritical”—saying one thing, doing another.

Seventy-two percent of “outsiders” describe churchgoers as “insensitive to others.”

Seventy-five percent of “outsiders” describe churchgoers as “too involved in politics.”

The above “outsiders” are Americans between the ages of 16 and 29 (Unchristian, by David Kinnaman, p. 34).

“Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their Jewish brothers. Some were saying, ‘We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain.’ Others were saying, ‘We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine.’ Still others were saying, ‘We have had to borrow money to pay the king’s tax on our fields and vineyards. Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our countrymen and though our sons are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others.’

“When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, ‘You are exacting usury from your own countrymen!’ So I called together a large meeting to deal with them and said: ‘As far as possible, we have bought back our Jewish brothers who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your brothers, only for them to be sold back to us!’ They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.

“So I continued, ‘What you are doing is not right. Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let the exacting of usury stop! Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the usury you are charging them—the hundredth part of the money, grain, new wine and oil.’

‘We will give it back,’ they said. ‘And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say.’ Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised.

“I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, ‘In this way may God shake out of his house and possessions every man who does not keep this promise. So may such a man be shaken out and emptied!’ At this the whole assembly said, ‘Amen,’ and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.”

(Nehemiah 5:1-13, NIV)
OUT OF THE STORY

This week’s story occurs while the people of God are trying to rebuild the walls but can’t contribute financially because of their poverty. Briefly describe what you see happening to God’s people in this story.

Circle the words “we,” “our,” and “us” as they recur in this passage. How do these words reveal a sense of solidarity against injustice?

What is Nehemiah’s reaction to injustice in verse 6? Explain how this kind of anger is good.

How did God’s original instructions serve to prevent this kind of tragedy? (Read Exodus 22:25; Deuteronomy 15:7, 8, 11; 23:19.)

How do Nehemiah and the faithful people respond to the injustice? How do they begin to remedy the problem?

Reflect for a moment on the significance of buying the slaves back in Nehemiah 5:8. What is the response of the nobles and the wealthy in this story to Nehemiah’s rebuke?

What is the message God has for you in this story?

In a sentence, write what you think the good news is in this passage.

What other stories or events in Scripture does this passage remind you of? In what way(s)?

other eyes

“Complete possession is proved only by giving. All you are unable to possess you.” —André Gide, 20th-century French novelist, essayist, critic.

“You don’t live in a world all alone. Your brothers are here, too.” —Albert Schweitzer, 20th-century French Protestant clergyman, philosopher, physician, music scholar.

punch lines

“If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs. . . . Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land” (Deuteronomy 15:7, 8, 10, 11, NIV).

“Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ. . . . So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith” (Galatians 6:2, 10, NASB).

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. . . . They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. . . . Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:1, 42, 46, 47, NASB).
Sabbath
As you answer the *What Do You Think?* section of this week’s lesson, you were challenged to consider who Christians might be “especially” good to: nonbelievers or believers. Galatians 6:10 asserts we should be good to “all people,” but read Paul’s words and think about why those words are true. Some might think Paul’s thinking is backwards, but people are not wary of Christianity because of how we treat the world as much as they observe how Christians treat each other. What might our church be like if we started with Paul’s words and followed Nehemiah’s actions? How might these words be relevant for the people in Nehemiah’s day?

Sunday
Read the passage in the *Into the Story* section of the student lesson and respond to the study questions provided. How is the theme of slavery and redemption portrayed in this section of Nehemiah? What provisions did God make to prevent this from happening? What is more surprising: the horrible slavery the rich engaged in or the fact that they obeyed the command of God and immediately made it right?

Monday
Consider the message of the *Key Text* in this week’s lesson that reveals how the sinful practices of Israel caused Nehemiah to become angry. In every person there is a sense of “ought” that stirs humanity to decry slavery. Nehemiah could not believe his countrymen were taking advantage of the poor seemingly without conscience. When in your life have you witnessed something terribly wrong and didn’t know what to do about it? Whom do you know that has spoken out against evil with effectiveness like Nehemiah?

Tuesday
In this week’s *Flashlight* quote from *Prophets and Kings*, Ellen White connects the way Nehemiah and others purchased back their people from slavery to how Christ redeemed humanity from sin. In fact, we are told that “by deeds of liberality toward His poor we may prove the sincerity of our gratitude for the mercy extended to us” (*Prophets and Kings*, p. 652). What opportunities do we have today to demonstrate our understanding of what Christ did for us by extending compassion to others?

Wednesday
Read the *Punch Lines* in this week’s lesson and choose two verses that you think Christians today need to understand and rewrite them in your own words. (Use the Notes section in the back of this journal to rewrite these verses.) Be sure to paraphrase this passage according to how it speaks to you. Pray that God gives you an opportunity to share these words with someone else this week.

Thursday
The positive way the people of God respond to Nehemiah’s challenge is comforting. Is there a cause or an opportunity to serve someone in need that you and your friends can do as a group? Nehemiah’s individual courage is remarkable, but some of Christianity’s finest moments are when a community of people get together and do the right thing. Gather your friends together and plan a small act of liberation for someone in need.

Friday
Throughout Scripture there are those who have stood alone in the way of evil. While true believers are drawn to their side for support, it takes a tremendous amount of courage to stand first. Whom do you recall in the pages of the Bible or history that have made such a stand for the right? How are they remembered?

Action Plan

**this week’s reading**

*Prophets and Kings*, chapters 54, 55.

A special adaptation of *Prophets and Kings* has been created just for you by the White Estate and the Pacific Press Publishing Association. Get more info about it at: www.cornerstoneconnections.net. By following this plan you will read at least one book of the Conflict of the Ages Series each year.
hungry for more

flashlight

“Every true turning to the Lord brings abiding joy into the life. When a sinner yields to the influence of the Holy Spirit, he sees his own guilt and defilement in contrast with the holiness of the great Searcher of hearts. . . . It is God’s glory to encircle sinful, repentant human beings in the arms of His love, to bind up their wounds, to cleanse them from sin, and to clothe them with the garments of salvation” (Prophets and Kings, p. 668).

keytext

“They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.”

(Nehemiah 8:8, NIV)
Rank the statements below according to which you think are the most meaningful ways to respond to God's mercy in worship.

The best way to show gratitude and commitment to God for His grace is...

- joyful celebration
- thoughtful reflection
- faithful obedience
- frequently retell the story
- offer excellence in worship, praise, and music

“So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

“Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbadanah, Zechariah and Meshullam. Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, ‘Amen! Amen!’ Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

“The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabah, Hanan and Pelaiah— instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.

“Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, ‘This day is sacred to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep.’ For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. Nehemiah said, ‘Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.’

“The Levites calmed all the people, saying, ‘Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve.’ Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

“On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the scribe to give attention to the words of the Law. They found written in the Law, which the Lord had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in booths during the feast of the seventh month and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem: ‘Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from the law of God was almost lost in translation. Judah had intermarried and become mixed with other nations so much that they had lost their connection with the language of the law of God. This is why there were people present to help the people understand. In Jewish thought, the people’s standing is understood to reflect complete silence.
"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits; who pardons all your iniquities, who heals all your diseases; who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with lovingkindness and compassion; who satisfies your years with good things, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle" (Psalm 103:1-5, NASB).

"For thus the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, has said, ‘In repentance and rest you will be saved, in quietness and trust is your strength’” (Isaiah 30:15, NASB).

"See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, and death and adversity; in that I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments, that you may live and multiply, and that the Lord your God may bless you in the land where you are entering to possess it” (Deuteronomy 30:15, 16, NASB).

"Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19, NASB).

"And what greater calamity can fall upon a nation than the loss of worship?”—Ralph Waldo Emerson, 19th-century essayist and poet.

"The perfect church service would be one we were almost unaware of; our attention would have been on God.”—C. S. Lewis, 20th-century English novelist and essayist.
Sabbath

The What Do You Think? section of this week’s lesson invites you to rank the best responses to God in worship from your perspective. The people of Judah met to be reintroduced to God and His law, but many of those present had been slaves and were bought back to freedom by Nehemiah and others. Sadly, some were unfamiliar with God, His law, and even the language, so that the worship leaders had to explain the message in plain, simple language. Read Hebrews 5:12 and describe the similarities between the Hebrews in the Old Testament and those in the New Testament.

Sunday

Read the passage in the Into the Story section of the student lesson and respond to the study questions provided. As you survey the spectacular day of worship and renewal you may notice the genuine heartfelt response of the people to God. The walls are up but much of the city is in disrepair, which is symbolic of where the people are as well. Their hearts are sincere but their understanding of God and His will has a long way to go. What part of this story inspires you personally, and why?

Monday

The Key Text for this week is Nehemiah 8:8, which simply states: “They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read” (NIV). How many times have you opened God’s Word and struggled to understand the meaning or the point of the passage? Some feel as if the Bible is a magic book, that if you only open the pages then something should happen. But more often than not, Bible study and your devotion to God come as a result of simple, consistent conversation and communion. Take a moment to think about what you can do to connect with God in a more regular way so that the Word of God and your overall experience is familiar instead of awkward.

Tuesday

In this week’s Flashlight quote from Prophets and Kings, Ellen White reminds people how much God waits to restore and rejoice with the sinner who comes to God in faith. She states: “It is God’s glory to encircle sinful, repentant human beings in the arms of His love, to bind up their wounds, to cleanse them from sin, and to clothe them with the garments of salvation” (p. 668). How does this picture of God match with your perception? How often have you resisted praying or coming close to God because of the distance that has grown between you and Him? Even though it seems awkward, consider how much God wants to reconcile! Maybe you know someone who is distant and doesn’t feel like they can return to God or even speak to Him because of their shame. Begin today by praying for them and perhaps gently sharing with them this insight.

Wednesday

The Punch Lines in this week’s lesson represent an array of themes in this story. Repentance, worship, and consecration are a few examples you may notice in the texts given. Which text speaks to you personally? Which text captures the essence of the worship service taking place in this week’s story? When in your life has a worship experience made an indelible mark on your spiritual growth? What key elements of the service do you remember the most? Why?

Thursday

In this week’s lesson we view a worship service filled with beautiful images of God’s people reconnecting with Him and reconsecrating their lives to His purpose. So many good things happen in this worship service that the people are not sure how to react. Should they dance and sing and throw a party? Or should they be more reflective and still? Knowing how to respond to God’s grace is not something that should be legislated or manufactured. The exercise of being still and quiet is extremely helpful to your soul, but so is shouting and praising God out of a grateful heart. Do both this week. Find ways to express your joy and find ways to be still and let your praise sink in and internally transform you from the inside out.

Friday

Have you ever clapped out of praise when no one else clapped or said “Amen” all by yourself? Think about how God feels when we come to Him in worship and how glad He is that we are there. It is hard to imagine God finally getting our attention only to inform us of the correct posture and program that He prefers us to praise Him with. If this story gives us anything to think about it is the simple way God calls us to return to Him and the personal way in which we freely worship and show our gratitude.


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Century after century passed away; finally the voices of the prophets ceased. The hand of the oppressor was heavy upon Israel. As the Jews departed from God, faith grew dim, and hope well-nigh ceased to illuminate the future. The words of the prophets were uncomprehended by many. . . . But in heaven’s council the hour for the coming of Christ had been determined; and ‘when the fullness of time was come, God sent forth His Son . . .’ Galatians 4:4” (Prophets and Kings, p. 700).
**what do you think?**

When things are really going badly for me, I usually . . .

___ talk to someone about it.
___ pray.
___ think of something I can do to make things better.
___ get more and more discouraged till everything seems awful.
___ try to avoid other people.
___ focus on positive things.
___ imagine a time when things will be better.

**did you know?**

The prophecies of Isaiah come from some of the darkest hours of Jewish history—from a time when God seemed to have abandoned His people. Foreign invaders threatened the nation of Judah. Long after the time of the historical prophet Isaiah, his prophecies took on deeper meaning as the nation entered its darkest time—when Jerusalem was captured by the Babylonians, and its people were taken into captivity. But through God’s prophet came a message of hope for the future. Like a tiny candle flame flickering in darkness came the promise that someday the years of exile and captivity would end. God’s people would be restored to their land.

But the prophecies of Isaiah looked forward to more than just a return from exile. They pointed forward to a coming Deliverer who would do far more than provide freedom for exiled captives. They foretold the coming of a Messiah who would set people free from bondage to sin and despair. When things were at their worst, God gave His people the hope of ultimate deliverance.

**INTO THE STORY**

“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord—and he will delight in the fear of the Lord. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist. The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.”

(Isaiah 11:1-9; 40:28-31, NIV)

“The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper’s nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”

“Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”

(Isaiah 40:28-31, NIV)
“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned” (Isaiah 9:2, NIV).

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever” (Isaiah 9:6, 7, NIV).

“Hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (Romans 5:5, NIV).

“But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons” (Galatians 4:4, 5, NIV).

“Three grand essentials to happiness in this life are something to do, something to love, and something to hope for.” —Joseph Addison, 18th-century British writer.

“Hope is a good breakfast, but it is a bad supper.” —Sir Francis Bacon, 16th-century British writer and scientist.

“What oxygen is to the lungs, such is hope to the meaning of life.” —Emil Brunner, 20th-century Swiss theologian.
Sabbath
When things were darkest for the people of Israel, God promised hope in the form of a Deliverer who would come and restore the world to a perfect state. When we’re at our darkest hour, God also promises to help us. Choose one Bible verse from the passages we’re studying this week, plus one other Bible promise, that can give you hope when you’re feeling discouraged. Write both verses out below:

Tuesday
Read the passage from Prophets and Kings in the Flashlight section of the lesson. In this passage Ellen White takes us beyond the time of Isaiah, beyond the time of the exile and return from Babylon, to the era when Jesus was born. At that time, Mrs. White says that “faith grew dim, and hope well-nigh ceased to illuminate the future.” Yet it was at that very time that God’s divine plan fell into place. When things seemed so dark that many people had given up hoping for a Deliverer, at that moment God Himself came into the world in the form of Jesus of Nazareth—the ultimate Deliverer.

God’s people waited thousands of years for the promise of a Messiah to be fulfilled. Jesus’ followers have waited 2,000 years for the promise of His second coming to be fulfilled. Do you think today we’re living in the time when faith has grown dim, and hope no longer seems to illuminate the future? If so, what can this passage say to us?

Wednesday
Look up Isaiah 9:6 in the Punch Lines section. Using a Bible concordance and/or a chain reference Bible, find other verses in the Old Testament that foretell the coming of Jesus. List some below. What information does each verse give about the coming Messiah?

Thursday
Our Bible lesson this week has been all about offering hope to people who are discouraged. When the Jews were discouraged and felt God had abandoned them, the promise of a Messiah and Deliverer gave them hope. What gives you hope when times are tough? If you had a friend who was discouraged, what hope could you offer? Can you think of someone you know now with whom you can share this hope? How will you do it?

Friday
In your prayer time today, ask God to keep hope alive in your heart. If you’re discouraged about any situation in your life right now, choose a Bible verse you can memorize and repeat to give you hope. Tell God in prayer that you are claiming that verse as His personal promise of hope to you!


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the servant hero

“For more than a thousand years the Jewish people had waited the coming of the promised Saviour. Their brightest hopes had rested upon this event. For a thousand years, in song and prophecy, in temple rite and household prayer, His name had been enshrined; and yet when He came, they did not recognize Him as the Messiah for whom they had so long waited” (Prophets and Kings, p. 710).

keytext

“He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.”

(Isaiah 53:3, NIV)
Do you follow the adventures of cartoon or comic book superheroes? What about heroes from movies, books, or legends? What makes a great hero?

My favorite hero is _____________________________ because ____________________________________

**INTO THE STORY**

“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor.”

(Isaiah 61:1-3; 53:2-7, 9, 11, NIV)

“After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.”

(Isaiah 53:10-11, NIV)

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

“He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. . . .

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(Isaiah 61:1-3; 53:2-7, 9, 11, NIV)

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(Isaiah 61:1-3; 53:2-7, 9, 11, NIV)
According to Isaiah 61:1, what was Jesus’ mission?

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his law the islands will put their hope” (Isaiah 42:1-4, NIV).

What effect would Jesus’ ministry have on the people of Israel?

“[Jesus] said to them, ‘How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?’ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:25-27, NIV).

According to Isaiah 53, how would people feel about Jesus?

“Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experiences of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, vision cleared, ambition inspired and success achieved.”—Helen Keller, 20th-century U.S. author and speaker.

What would Jesus’ suffering accomplish for Israel?

“Life is a place of service. Joy can be real only if people look upon their life as a service and have a definite object in life outside themselves and their personal happiness.”—Leo Tolstoy, 19th-century Russian author.

How many ways can you think of in which the prophecies in these passages were fulfilled by Jesus during His life here on earth?

“A person who is worthy of being a leader wants power not for himself, but in order to be of service.”—Sam J. Ervin, Jr., 20th-century U.S. senator.

What does this passage say to us regarding the suffering that we experience?
Sabbath
Look at the What Do You Think? section of the lesson. Whom did you choose as your hero? What qualities in that character do you admire?

Some heroes are admirable because they’re good-looking, strong, powerful, or have amazing abilities. What does Isaiah 53:2, 3 say about Jesus?

Jesus wasn’t your typical superhero. People weren’t attracted to His good looks or His amazing strength. Instead, it was His compassion that drew people to Him—His ability to suffer along with people. He was no comic book superhero, but a true servant leader.

Sunday
Based on what you read in Isaiah 53 and 61, fill in the blanks below to make up a “Messiah Wanted” ad—a job description for the job only Jesus could do.

MESSIAH WANTED: Must be able to ___________________________.
This job requires someone who is _________ and __________. The ideal applicant should ____________ and _________________.

Monday
The Key Text (Isaiah 53:3) says that the Messiah would be “a man of sorrows.” Look up Luke 10:21; John 15:11; John 17:13.

What quality of Jesus is mentioned in each of these passages? ____________________________

How could Jesus be both a joyful person and also a “man of sorrows”? Explain.

Tuesday
The Flashlight section of our lesson tells us that even though the Jews had been looking forward to the Messiah’s coming for more than 1,000 years, they didn’t recognize Jesus as the Messiah when He came. Why do you think they didn’t accept Jesus as the Messiah? What did they expect their Messiah to be and to do? Why do you think they had those expectations?

Sometimes God’s answers to our prayers don’t look like what we expect, either. Like the Jewish people in Jesus’ time, we can get so hung up on expecting God to work in a certain way that we don’t even recognize His answers when they come.

Wednesday
Read Isaiah 42:1-4 from the Punch Lines section of the lesson. This passage is another of the “suffering servant” songs in Isaiah. Look back at your Messiah job description in Monday’s section of the lesson. What could you add to that description after reading Isaiah 42?

Thursday
Jesus’ life demonstrated how a servant could also be a leader. No, He didn’t kick out the Romans and reestablish the throne of Israel. But through suffering, and caring for those who were suffering, He changed the world forever.

Jesus calls us to follow His example—to lead by caring for others, even if it involves suffering ourselves. What is one practical thing you can do today to help others who are suffering? What will it cost you to do it?

Friday
Take a look back at what we said about expectations in Tuesday’s lesson. Can you think of a situation in your life in which you have been expecting God to act in a certain way? What did you expect God to do for you?

Is it possible that God might have a different plan than you expected? How can you keep your eyes and your heart open for God’s leading? Remember that if the Jews of Jesus’ time had read the prophecies of Isaiah more carefully, they might have been prepared to accept a Messiah who was going to suffer for them. Studying the Bible will help you recognize God’s answers to your prayers, even if they don’t fit your expectations!

*This week’s reading*
Prophets and Kings, chapter 59.

A special adaptation of Prophets and Kings has been created just for you by the White Estate and the Pacific Press Publishing Association. Get more info about it at: www.cornerstoneconnections.net. By following this plan you will read at least one book of the Conflict of the Ages Series each year.
eternal liberation

flashlight

“The darkest hour of the church’s struggle with the powers of evil is that which immediately precedes the day of her final deliverance. But none who trust in God need fear; for ‘when the blast of the terrible ones is as a storm against the wall,’ God will be to His church ‘a refuge from the storm.’ Isaiah 25:4” (Prophets and Kings, p. 725).

Scripture Story: Isaiah 65; 66; Malachi 3; 4.
Commentary: Prophets and Kings, chapter 60.

keytext

“I tell you, I will never again drink this wine until the day I drink the new wine with you in my Father’s Kingdom.”

(Matthew 26:29, TEV)
As Christians we look forward to the day when Christ will come and take the righteous elect to their heavenly home. While we are still battling with sin, pain, and suffering in this world, which voice of the Lord appeals to you most in times of distress?

“I am here.”
“I hear you.”
“I understand.”
“I care.”

Think of the saddest moment you have experienced in your life; does the issue of God’s grace through Christ give you some hope to overcome? How can you encourage your friends in similar situations to accept that God cares?

The lion, particularly the face of the male, is one of the most widely recognized animal symbols in human culture. Lions live for approximately 10 to 14 years in the wild, while in captivity they can live up to 25 years. A lion’s roar can be heard up to five miles away.

Male lions weigh from 330 to 530 pounds; females weigh 270 to 300 pounds. Lions stand between three and a half and four feet tall at the shoulder.

“Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; He who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth; he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed. They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. . . .

“The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust will be the serpent’s food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain,’ says the Lord.”

“For this is what the Lord says, ‘I will extend peace to her like a river, and the wealth of nations like a flooding stream; you will nurse and be carried on her arm and dandled on her knees. As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you, and you will be comforted over Jerusalem.’ When you see this, your heart will rejoice and you will flourish like grass; the hand of the Lord will be made known to his servants, but his fury will be shown to his foes. . . .

“As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me,’ declares the Lord, ‘so will your name and descendants endure. From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come and bow down before me,’ says the Lord.”

“So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me,’ says the Lord Almighty. ‘I the Lord do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.’”

“Remember the law of my servant Moses, and the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel. See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

(Isaiah 65:17-21, 25; 66:12-14, 22, 23; Malachi 3:5, 6; 4:4-6, NIV)
punch lines

“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood” (Hebrews 12:2-4, NIV).

“Salvation is to be found through him alone; for there is no one else in all the world, whose name God has given to men, by whom we can be saved” (Acts 4:12, TEV).

“Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8, NIV).

“The time for judging this world has come, when Satan, the ruler of this world, will be cast out. And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself” (John 12:31, 32, NLT).

“As in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark, and knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be” (Matthew 24:38, 39, KJV).

“Mercy does not give us what we deserve; grace gives us what we don’t deserve.”—Heather-Dawn Small, Women’s Ministries director, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

“There is no liberation without labor . . . and there is no freedom which is free.”—Siri Singh Sahib.
Sabbath
The What Do You Think? section of this week’s lesson asks you to ponder the great day of Christ’s second coming. Although we live in a time and age characterized with pain and suffering, the loving voice of our Savior constantly appeals to us not to harden our hearts but to make a noble choice to accept Him as our Savior. This week, think about how you can humbly take steps to respond to the four voices of Christ in the What Do You Think? section.

Sunday
The excerpt from Isaiah 65:17 talks of God making a new earth and new heavens. In view of your own situation in the present earth, would God be just in His decision to destroy the current earth and replace it with a new one? What about those who believe in the joy and happiness of this world and its luring incentives? Do you think they will inherit the new earth? What must you do to be part of the eternal liberation that will come by Christ’s second coming?

Monday
The Key Text reminds us of Christ’s commitment toward our salvation. Reflect on the circumstances in which you have shown the virtue of commitment. To whom were you most committed? Your parents? Your boy/girlfriend? Your nation? Your teacher? God? Rank them from the most to the least and give a reason for your ranking.

The Key Text also projects into the future, after the end of sin. How does this testi-mony of Jesus give you hope even after death? How can you improve your scope of hope in relation to your faith? Consider teaming up with your friends and identify opportunities to feed your faith as a heaven-bound child of God.

Tuesday
Take a look at the powerful statement of Ellen White in the Flashlight section of the lesson. The ability and power of Christ to redeem a fallen world revealed the profound grace and mercy, and complete liberation, which are deeply entrenched in God’s master plan of salvation. Are there situations in your life in which you have borne the consequences of other person’s mistakes? How did you feel? As you consider these situations, think about what Christ experienced on your behalf at Calvary.

Wednesday
After reading the selected verses in the Punch Lines section of the lesson, choose two verses which you think are most relevant to your life as you wait for the second coming of Christ. Do you have friends or relatives with similar experiences? In what way can you encourage them to remain strong in their faith amid pain, suffering, and boredom, which continue to suppress us in this world? Paraphrase the verses you chose and recite them to a friend during a dinner invitation this week.

Thursday
Take time to read Prophets and Kings, chapter 60. An overview of the new earth is provided: “There every power will be developed, every capability increased. The grandest enterprises will be carried forward, the loftiest aspirations will be reached, the highest ambitions realized. And still there will appear new heights to surmount, new wonders to admire, new truths to comprehend, fresh objects of study to call forth the powers of body and mind and soul” (p. 731). In view of the powerful insight that Ellen White gives on the state of the new earth, what do you look forward to the most?

Friday
Have you ever thought of what life will be like in the new earth? Think of a time when you moved from one home to another—a better one. How did you feel in your new home? As you reflect on the promised new earth, consider making this your prayer:

Dear God, I admit that I am a sinner. I believe Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead so that I might have eternal life. Please forgive me of my sins. I accept Your gift of eternal life and choose to follow You, confessing Jesus as my Savior and Lord. Thank You for making Your home in my heart. In Jesus’ name I pray, Amen.”

*www.cornerstoneconnections.net

A special adaptation of Prophets and Kings has been created just for you by the White Estate and the Pacific Press Publishing Association. Get more info about it at: www.cornerstoneconnections.net. By following this plan you will read at least one book of the Conflict of the Ages Series each year.