

An aerial photograph of the ocean with waves breaking on the right side. The water is a deep teal color, and the white foam of the waves is prominent. The word "FAITHFUL" is centered in the middle of the image, between two horizontal white lines.

**FAITHFUL**

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES “FAITHFUL”

Have you ever heard the saying “I’ll believe it when I see it”? Most of us have probably used that phrase ourselves at some point or another. Believing in something, even when you can’t physically see it, can be quite the challenge. It takes faith.

So, what does it mean to be faithful? Hebrews 11:1 says, “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.” Through this study, we’ll find the theme that “God is faithful and honors the faithful” play out time and time again. Various figures in the Old Testament, those who followed God even when times were difficult, saw this truth for themselves, as we will discover in the readings to come.

Yes, God is always faithful, and he continually honors those who are faithful to him. The faithfulness of God should inspire and challenge the church to go on in faith.

## HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

### The Biblical Text

We begin each guide with text from Scripture. We believe all discussions about the truth God has revealed to us should begin with his inspired Word. So, we encourage you to read the text carefully even if the verses are ones you are already familiar with.

### Equip

The questions presented in the “equip” section of each guide are designed to help you read the biblical text carefully. By doing so, you can figure out the meaning of the passage. Some questions might lead to obvious answers, but others may not. What is important is that the questions force you to slow down and consider the text beyond just a quick and cursory reading. It also provides the basis for an informed discussion on biblically rooted ways to apply the text, as the next section covers. Note that, at the end of each guide, we have included thoughts about the Equip questions. These thoughts do not cover every possible answer, nor do they claim to be the best possible answers. However, they can help guide you if you feel puzzled by a certain Bible passage.

### Encourage

The “encourage” questions aim to move you from understanding the text toward applying it to your life. These questions will begin this process by asking you to reflect on your life as it was, as it is, and as it could be in relationship to what the Bible passage teaches. By prompting you to think about your life in the light of what Scripture teaches, you can be encouraged to be open to God’s transforming work in you.

### Enthuse

In the “enthuse” section, we ask you to consider a specific way that you can apply the truth of Scripture to your life that week. This always begins with prayer to God and seeking his guidance. In many cases, we then ask you to reflect on how it went when you sought to live out what God was calling you to do.

### Something to Consider

Finally, the “something to consider” section provides you with a devotional reading from one of the writers behind this study. The devotionals aim to present you with both thoughtful and personal insights on the topic. Our thoughts and stories may help you to live out the Scripture passages as well.

# FAITH 01

ISAIAH 44  
EZRA 1

God is  
faithful to  
deliver his  
people.  
God is  
faithful to  
deliver you.

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## INTRODUCTION TO EZRA

Although God chose the Israelites as his own people, they failed to follow his commands, often worshipping idols that pandered to their desires for sex and other pleasures instead. The people even split into two kingdoms around 930 BC. The southern kingdom, Judea, had some kings who walked with the Lord and encouraged their people to do the same, but the northern kingdom, which kept the name Israel, consistently failed to follow God.

In 722 BC, God punished the unfaithful Israelites by allowing Assyria to conquer them and take them into captivity. Rather than learn from its neighbor's mistakes, the kingdom of Judah allowed itself to fall deep into idolatry as well, so God allowed Babylonia to conquer it as well in 586 BC. Babylon had conquered Assyria decades earlier, so the mighty nation had taken all of God's people captive.

Even though the people failed to remain faithful to God, he always remained faithful to his people. In fact, some members of a "faithful remnant" kept turning to God no matter what circumstances they faced. Through prophets like Isaiah, God promised that, one day, he would raise up a king who would allow the Israelites and Judeans to return to their homelands.

In 539 BC, that's exactly what happened when Cyrus II of Persia conquered Babylon. He issued a decree allowing many people groups, including God's own, to return to their native lands. At that point, they had a decision to make: trust God and follow his will, or stay in a foreign land with foreign gods.

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### Isaiah 44:21-28

<sup>21</sup>Remember these things, O Jacob,  
for you are my servant, O Israel.  
I have made you, you are my servant;  
O Israel, I will not forget you.

<sup>22</sup>I have swept away your offenses like a cloud,  
your sins like the morning mist.  
Return to me,  
for I have redeemed you."

<sup>23</sup>Sing for joy, O heavens, for the Lord has done this;  
shout aloud, O earth beneath.  
Burst into song, you mountains,  
you forests and all your trees,  
for the Lord has redeemed Jacob,  
he displays his glory in Israel.

#### *Jerusalem to Be Inhabited*

<sup>24</sup>"This is what the Lord says—  
your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb:  
I am the Lord,

who has made all things,  
who alone stretched out the heavens,  
who spread out the earth by myself,

<sup>25</sup>who foils the signs of false prophets  
and makes fools of diviners,  
who overthrows the learning of the wise  
and turns it into nonsense,

<sup>26</sup>who carries out the words of his servants  
and fulfills the predictions of his messengers,  
who says of Jerusalem, 'It shall be inhabited,'  
of the towns of Judah, 'They shall be built,'  
and of their ruins, 'I will restore them,'

<sup>27</sup>who says to the watery deep, 'Be dry,  
and I will dry up your streams,'

<sup>28</sup>who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that  
I please; he will say of Jerusalem, "Let it be rebuilt," and of the  
temple, "Let its foundations be laid.'"

### Ezra 1

<sup>1</sup>In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word  
of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of  
Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm  
and to put it in writing:

<sup>2</sup>"This is what Cyrus king of Persia says:

"The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the  
earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at  
Jerusalem in Judah. <sup>3</sup>Anyone of his people among you—may his  
God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build  
the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in  
Jerusalem. <sup>4</sup>And the people of any place where survivors may now  
be living are to provide him with silver and gold, with goods and  
livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in  
Jerusalem."

<sup>5</sup>Then the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and  
Levites—everyone whose heart God had moved—prepared to go up  
and build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup>All their neighbors  
assisted them with articles of silver and gold, with goods and  
livestock, and with valuable gifts, in addition to all the freewill  
offerings.

<sup>7</sup>Moreover, King Cyrus brought out the articles belonging to the  
temple of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from  
Jerusalem and had placed in the temple of his god. <sup>8</sup>Cyrus king of  
Persia had them brought by Mithredath the treasurer, who  
counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah.

<sup>9</sup>This was the inventory:

gold dishes	30
silver dishes	1,000
silver pans	29
<sup>10</sup> gold bowls	30
matching silver bowls	410
other articles	1,000

<sup>11</sup>In all, there were 5,400 articles of gold and of silver. Sheshbazzar  
brought all these along when the exiles came up from Babylon to  
Jerusalem.

## EQUIP

Read Isaiah 44:21-28. In what ways has God manifested his power? In what surprising ways would he use Cyrus, the upcoming king of Persia, to accomplish his purposes for Israel?

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Read Ezra 1:1-4. What were the specific instructions that Cyrus gave concerning the Lord's temple at Jerusalem? According to the author, why did Cyrus issue such a generous decree?

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Read Ezra 1:5-11. How did certain members of God's people faithfully obey the opportunity he had given them? In what ways did God sustain them through the initial steps of their mission?

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## ENCOURAGE

Many of us are familiar with Romans 8:28, a New Testament passage in which the apostle Paul reminded his fellow believers, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." (NIV) That's a principle we see at work in the Old Testament passages we've read today. Although being exiled from the Promised Land had to have been an incredibly difficult hardship for God's people, some continued to trust in him, and others rediscovered their need for him. Once the time was right, God gave them the opportunity to show their faith by returning to the land and rebuilding his temple. Have you ever gone through a difficult time and found that it actually strengthened your faith? Describe how you felt during the ordeal as you tried to keep trusting God.

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Those who were faithful to God must have been excited when Cyrus issued his decree that allowed them to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Lord's temple. However, the text itself only mentions a faithful response from three out of twelve of the tribes that God set up in the Promised Land of Israel (Ezra 1:5), and surely not every single member of those tribes took up the opportunity given to them. We can't be sure what all the other people were up to, but some may have grown complacent in the foreign lands, not wanting to go back and rebuild God's temple. After all, that would be a long, risky endeavor. The tragic fact of the matter is, some people slip away from faithful obedience to God. Perhaps they grow apathetic to what they write off as "church life," or perhaps they reject belief in God altogether. What are some specific ways you can nurture your faith right now so that it can weather difficult times?

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## ENTHUSE

As we read in our Bible passages for this week, God not only delivered his people from their hardships but also gave them the ability to complete their work for him. He ensured that they would have the means by which to rebuild the temple. When we face difficult times, we need to remember that God still promises to supply our needs—and our ultimate need is him! We as Christians today have access to the Holy Spirit, who empowers us to carry out God's will in our lives. We also have plenty resources to serve God: his word is always right at our fingertips, and we have a wonderful faith community to participate in. However, we must recognize our need for God by using those resources consistently, not just when we're in a bind. This week, pray that God would reveal to you at least one important way you could better nourish your faith right now. Perhaps it's more time dedicated to focused prayer, a deeper dive into his word, a commitment to serve in the church, introducing someone to Jesus, or something else entirely. Pray that God would enable you to take that step of faith right now this week. Take time to write here about what God does for you during this initial step.

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### Something to Consider

*By Bobby Miller*

The longer I've been with Mt. Carmel, the more I've realized that there's something everybody wants: deliverance. Deliverance from evil. Deliverance from struggles. Deliverance from pain.

I, for one, sure know what it's like to long for deliverance. In early 2011, I was diagnosed with severe depression and anxiety. For a few years, I went through medication after medication, hoping that one would help me. Instead, some made me feel even worse, and others had terrible side effects.

Of course, medicine's not the only way to treat depression and anxiety, so I did everything I could on my end to try feeling better. I took mindfulness classes. I read books about overcoming stress and depression. I ate even healthier than I did before. I exercised regularly. I maintained a consistent sleep schedule. I prayed every day—even when it felt like God wasn't helping.

I did everything I could, but I still didn't see any progress.

It wasn't until medication #17, after three years of trying, that I found one that truly helped. And, of course, it's not as if all my problems melted away the moment I popped that pill. I needed to find the right dosage of it and figure out which other medication would complement it well to address the full gambit of symptoms I was enduring. That took some more time. After all, I'm quite sensitive to the side effects of medication, but I needed a whole lot of help.

Yet, after so many years of desperate prayers, when I sometimes thought deliverance was a myth, God graciously subdued my depression and anxiety. He finally allowed a certain medication combo to help me. He didn't eliminate my depression and anxiety, mind you. I still struggle with fatigue, a common symptom of depression, and I have my bouts of anxiety. Still, I think I'm more at peace now than I was even before my depression kicked in all those years ago.

But I didn't tell you that story to brag about how I endured a painful hardship. Rather, I wanted to give you an example of a struggle that one of your fellow Mt. Carmel members has gone through. It's only one example of many in our church. During my time with small groups and church classes, I've met lots of other people yearning for deliverance. Some are praying for reconciliation with their children. Others are praying for relief from chronic pain. Others are yearning for help in the midst of depression and anxiety too. The list goes on.

Let me make a bold assumption. I bet you're seeking deliverance from at

least one hardship as well. Maybe it's a small struggle, or maybe it's a huge one. I don't know. What I do know is, you don't have to go through it alone. If you reach out to the right people at Mt. Carmel, maybe the ones right there with you in your small group, then you can get prayers. You can get people who will listen. You may even get people who have gone through similar struggles.

And, of course, God is always there to listen.

It doesn't seem like God's always listening, though. Believe me, I know what it feels like to spend years praying prayers that seem useless. But I didn't give up. I held on to what little hope I had. And, right now, I pray that you'll do the same.

Holding on to hope. That's what God's most faithful Jews did back in the days of the Babylonian Captivity. The ones taken away from Judea spent nearly 50 years as captives in a foreign pagan land, all while the temple of their God lay in ruins. At times, even the most faithful people had to think that it looked like God was powerless. He didn't protect his own temple from destruction. He didn't protect his own people from captivity.

Sure, the people's sins were to blame for much of that—just read the prophets. Still, some of the Jews had been faithful all along, yet they were dragged away right alongside the idol worshippers. That had to be painful. That had to feel unfair. And even after they were all captive, the faithful ones repented and prayed for deliverance, but years and years went by. It would take decades until God finally allowed them to return to their homeland and rebuild his holy dwelling.

And let's not forget that some of the faithful people didn't live to see this deliverance. After all, 50 years is a long time. Plus, the people from the northern kingdom of Israel had been in exile for about 180 years. So, the ones who were originally taken away by sadistic invaders obviously never saw their nation restored.

In light of that, did the faithful ones who prayed for deliverance, only to die before the nation and temple were restored, hope in vain? Did God abandon them?

No. God never abandoned even one faithful person. He never has. He never will.

Sure, it was a blessing for those who got to see God's temple restored before their own eyes. But our Lord's plan went much deeper than rebuilding a temple and a nation. His plan all along was to raise a Messiah among these people. This anointed savior would deliver the faithful from more than just earthly oppressors. He would deliver them from sin. He would deliver them from eternal death. He would bless them with eternal life.

The exiles who faithfully followed God even in the midst of their hardships,

even in the midst of their doubts, truly did have a reason to hope. Yes, some lived here on earth long enough to see the rebuilding process begin. But all of them, even the ones who died, will taste eternal life. They will experience deliverance from the ultimate enemies of sin and death. Their savior would never abandon the faithful.

And today, we can know that our savior will never abandon us. If we remain faithful to him, he will also deliver us from sin and death. That's the promise Jesus made. That's the promise that runs through all of God's word.

Now, God never promised deliverance from all our troubles here and now. I sure wish he did, but that's not the case. Jesus himself told his disciples that they'd still have troubles in this world. Yet, he also promised them that he has overcome the world. He has overcome sin and death. We only need to trust in him.

Maybe you won't see deliverance from your troubles here and now. I know I still have plenty of struggles too. But I also know that God has given us an amazing community to help us bear one another's burdens. And I also know that, no matter what, those who persevere to the very end will be delivered. Eternal deliverance is a promise. Let's always hold on to that promise.

Let's always remain faithful.

# FAITH 02

ZECHARIAH 13

God  
will come  
through for  
the faithful  
in the midst  
of the trial.

## EQUIP THOUGHTS

*Read Isaiah 44:21-28. In what ways has God manifested his power? In what surprising ways would he use Cyrus, the upcoming king of Persia, to accomplish his purposes for Israel?* Through the prophet Isaiah, God promised that he would restore his chosen people, referred to here as Jacob. God would forgive their sins, an act of grace so amazing that the world itself would sing in praise to God. After all, God created the entire world, so he has the power to do as he pleases. Plus, he would expose false prophets as liars. However, Isaiah, a true prophet of God, was able to predict that Cyrus would one day allow the people to rebuild the Lord's temple. Since Isaiah wrote his book over two hundred years before Cyrus even came to power in Persia, that was an amazing prediction that only the true God could have inspired. This look into the redemption to come could give the people a reason to hope.

*Read Ezra 1:1-4. What were the specific instructions that Cyrus gave concerning the Lord's temple at Jerusalem? According to the author, why did Cyrus issue such a generous decree?* God's people had been exiled to foreign lands after being conquered by Assyria and Babylon. However, Cyrus's decree told the remaining people who worshipped God that they could return to Jerusalem in order to rebuild God's temple there. He even gave the Jews the means by which to carry out this mission. He instructed their neighbors to supply for their journey home and to offer some resources for rebuilding the temple. It's amazing that a pagan king would give such a decree, but according to Ezra, this proclamation happened thanks to God stirring the heart of Cyrus, as various prophets had predicted. (Plus, Cyrus may have wanted to win the people's favor through some generous offers, but the text doesn't mention that element.)

*Read Ezra 1:5-11. How did certain members of God's people faithfully obey the opportunity he had given them? In what ways did God sustain them through the initial steps of their mission?* Simply put, the people of God mentioned here obeyed him by taking the opportunity he had given them. They had permission to travel back to Jerusalem, so they collected the resources they were entrusted with, making sure that everything was carefully accounted for. Their neighbors obeyed Cyrus's instructions to offer them some supplies, and Cyrus himself returned some of the temple's precious items that previous kings had stolen. Thanks to these provisions, the exiled Jews could begin going back to Jerusalem.

OCT 09  
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## INTRODUCTION TO ZECHARIAH

The book of Zechariah is found in the Old Testament. At this point, the Israelites had spent over seventy years in exile. Throughout the history of Israel, we see the tension of worshiping God while also worshiping false gods and idols. Although God gave his people many generations to repent of their sins, to go back to worshipping him alone, their idolatry eventually led them into exile. Before exile, during exile, and even after exile, God used prophets to deliver his word to the people of Israel. Zechariah was one of those prophets.

The book of Zechariah takes place after the exile in Babylon. The Israelite people were returning to their homeland, a homeland that would have no doubt looked and felt different from the way they had left it. As you can imagine, they were mourning the “what was” of their previous home and culture, wondering what the future would hold.

The book of Zechariah is a complex prophetic book. Much of this book is written through dreams and visions, and it speaks about things that were yet to come, including the coming of the Messiah. For the people of Israel, Zechariah’s writing would have brought about hope as they looked forward to the coming of the Messiah. It would have also challenged the Israelites to live faithfully to God even as they returned from exile. For us, we can read the book of Zechariah and be encouraged, just like the Israelites would have been, and know that even when things are dark, difficult, heavy, and seemingly hopeless, God is, and always has been, in control. His words are true and will be fulfilled.

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### Zechariah 13 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup>“On that day a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity.

<sup>2</sup>“On that day, I will banish the names of the idols from the land, and they will be remembered no more,” declares the Lord Almighty. “I will remove both the prophets and the spirit of impurity from the land. <sup>3</sup>And if anyone still prophesies, his father and mother, to whom he was born, will say to him, ‘You must die, because you have told lies in the Lord’s name.’ When he prophesies, his own parents will stab him.

<sup>4</sup>“On that day every prophet will be ashamed of his prophetic vision. He will not put on a prophet’s garment of hair in order to deceive. <sup>5</sup>He will say, ‘I am not a prophet. I am a farmer; the land has been my livelihood since my youth.’ <sup>6</sup>If someone asks him, ‘What are these wounds on your body?’ he will answer, ‘The wounds I was given at the house of my friends.’

#### *The Shepherd Struck, the Sheep Scattered*

<sup>7</sup>“Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is close to me!” declares the Lord Almighty.

“Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered, and I will turn my hand against the little ones.

<sup>8</sup>In the whole land,” declares the Lord, “two-thirds will be struck down and perish; yet one-third will be left in it.

<sup>9</sup>This third I will bring into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold.

They will call on my name and I will answer them;

I will say, ‘They are my people,’ and they will say, ‘The LORD is our God.’”

## EQUIP

Read Zechariah 13:1-6. On a day yet to come, how would Jerusalem be cleansed of its sins and impurities? How would the Lord demonstrate his wrath toward false prophets?

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Read Zechariah 13:7-9. What was going to happen to the shepherd of God's people? What events would come next for God's people? Based on what you know about the Bible, who do you think this shepherd is, and how have these events played out?

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## ENCOURAGE

You might be familiar with the verse from Romans that says, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:23, NIV). It might be easy for us to look back on the history of Israel and say, "Look at all that sin!" Yet, sometimes it can become difficult to realize—and even more difficult to admit—our own sin in our own lives. The Israelites sinned and turned against God, and we have sinned and turned against God too. There is no denying it. Even despite the sin, God has made a way to be cleansed and forgiven of that sin. Reflect on the grace that God has shown you despite your sin. What has the grace of God done for you?

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Even when it might feel like all hope has been lost, God is still at work, God is still in charge, and, in the end, God will make all things right. There is nothing that can stand in his way. This truly is the message of Zechariah. Life is often filled with affliction, ups and downs, highs and lows. It's in the moments of affliction, the downs, and the lows that we often feel furthest from God. It can feel like our faith and our resolve to keep pushing onward is withering away. Zechariah's prophesy was to remind the people of Israel that, despite their circumstances, the Messiah was still coming and God was still working. Can you recall a time in your life that was one of those painful valleys, yet you were still able to witness God at work? How did he sustain you?

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## ENTHUSE

I'm sure that, at times, the Israelites would have felt stranded, forgotten, and lonely. Despite their circumstances, God was not silent. He spoke through the prophets. Sometimes, these prophets were welcomed and their message received. Other times, the prophets were rejected and their message ignored. God, through the prophets, spoke of the things still yet to come. The Israelites who received the prophets' messages and heeded their warnings would have been given hope to continue on in faith toward God, even if things appeared bleak. What a day it would have been to see the prophets' words become reality! For the Christian living today, our hope must remain in the coming of Christ. Our eyes must remain fastened on him and in his word. It becomes easy to become distracted by different things we experience in life. Pray this week that your eyes remain fastened on the Lord and that your faith remains only in him. If you find yourself getting bogged down by the worries or frustrations of the world, ask God to redirect your focus. Write down a prayer for peace and confidence that you can return to when things get difficult.

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## Something to Consider

By Aaron Adams

Recently, my wife and I have been watching the video series called The Chosen. The Chosen depicts the life and ministry of Jesus and his disciples. Now, take the video series with a grain of salt because it's produced by fallible human beings. It has exaggerations and dramatizations about Scripture. That doesn't necessarily mean it's always wrong or off base, but it doesn't mean it's necessarily always right or accurate either. What I'm saying is, don't take the series as Gospel. Only the true Gospel, found in Scripture, is Gospel.

Still, I've been fascinated by the series. What's fascinated me the most, and even educated me at times, is how it provides a clear connection between the Old Testament, specifically its prophecies, and the life of Jesus. Many of the Jews who lived in the days of Jesus would have been familiar with the Old Testament laws and history. Many of them would have been familiar with the prophecies of Zechariah as well. The Jewish people were desperately awaiting the Messiah, the Messiah that Zechariah prophesied about. Jesus came, and he began fulfilling these prophecies. The disciples and many others were getting to witness these prophecies being fulfilled. Yet, sometimes the prophecies were fulfilled much differently than what they had in mind.

Here's the truth. Zechariah not only prophesied about the coming of the Messiah, Jesus, but he also prophesied about the second coming of Jesus—when he returns and sets everything right. For the Christian living today, that should give us hope. It should give us hope that God is still in control. It should give us hope that God is still working. It should give us hope because, one day, God will set all things right. Do we know when? Nope. Should it spur us to live faithfully for the Lord while we await that day? Absolutely.

## EQUIP THOUGHTS

*Read Zechariah 13:1-6. On a day yet to come, how would Jerusalem be cleansed of its sins and impurities? How would the Lord demonstrate his wrath toward false prophets?* The book of Zechariah can be hard to understand. This is because much of the book is a vision, dream, or poem. Honestly, if you opened to a random chapter of Zechariah and just began to read it without any context, you might begin to wonder if you were actually reading Revelation. Chapter 13 of Zechariah is very closely connected to chapter 12. The day that Zechariah refers to is the day just prior to Christ's return. So, this prophesy was yet to be fulfilled. But here's what's awesome. Even though each of us sin, God continues, and will continue, to provide a way to be made right with him. We can be cleansed and forgiven of our sin. God provides the fountain, and Jesus is the living water. Check out the story in John 4:4-26.

Of course, that cleansing would involve dealing with false prophets. Most often when we think of prophets, we think of the good prophets called by God to deliver his word to his people. Zechariah would be one of those good prophets. Yet, throughout history, and even today, there have been false teachers and false prophets. These individuals have strayed from God's word and deceived others, leading them astray. As an Israelite, hearing the word of Zechariah (13:3-6) would have reminded you of a passage in Deuteronomy (13:6-11). There, Moses instructed the Israelites that, if even a family member enticed or influenced you towards worshipping or serving other gods, it had deadly consequences for those doing the deceiving. The false prophet would need to either confess his sin or be eliminated. These words of Zechariah should push us all the more to stick to God's truth and to hold firmly to his word.

*Read Zechariah 13:7-9. What was going to happen to the shepherd of God's people? What events would come next for God's people? Based on what you know about the Bible, who do you think this shepherd is, and how have these events played out?* The shepherd is Jesus. Jesus was the sacrifice paid for us. The sheep in this section of Scripture initially points to the disciples who would scatter at the arrest and eventual crucifixion of Jesus. The sheep image would also apply to the entire Jewish nation after Romans destroyed Jerusalem around AD 70, causing the citizens to scatter. While many people would be struck down, others would be refined by God. In this section of Scripture, we see that God promises to preserve believers even through the refining fires so that we can share in his goodness and holiness.

# FAITH 03

**EZRA 3:1-6**

**DEUT 12:13-14**

**EXODUS 20:23-26**

**HAGGAI 1:3-8**

The journey  
of faith is  
made up of  
the single  
steps of  
obedience  
to God.

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2022

## **Ezra 3:1-6 (NIV)**

<sup>1</sup>When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, the people assembled as one man in Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup>Then Jeshua son of Jozadak and his fellow priests and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and his associates began to build the altar of the God of Israel to sacrifice burnt offerings on it, in accordance with what is written in the Law of Moses the man of God. <sup>3</sup>Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the Lord, both the morning and evening sacrifices. <sup>4</sup>Then in accordance with what is written, they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles with the required number of burnt offerings prescribed for each day. <sup>5</sup>After that, they presented the regular burnt offerings, the New Moon sacrifices and the sacrifices for all the appointed sacred feasts of the Lord, as well as those brought as freewill offerings to the Lord. <sup>6</sup>On the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the Lord, though the foundation of the Lord's temple had not yet been laid.

## **Deuteronomy 12:13-14 (NIV)**

<sup>13</sup>Be careful not to sacrifice your burnt offerings anywhere you please. <sup>14</sup>Offer them only at the place the Lord will choose in one of your tribes, and there observe everything I command you.

## **Exodus 20:23-26 (NIV)**

<sup>23</sup>Do not make any gods to be alongside me; do not make for yourselves gods of silver or gods of gold.

<sup>24</sup>Make an altar of earth for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, your sheep and goats and your cattle. Wherever I cause my name to be honored, I will come to you and bless you. <sup>25</sup>If you make an altar of stones for me, do not build it with dressed stones, for you will defile it if you use a tool on it. <sup>26</sup>And do not go up to my altar on steps, lest your nakedness be exposed on it.'

### Haggai 1:3-8 (NIV)

<sup>3</sup>Then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai: <sup>4</sup>"Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?"

<sup>5</sup>Now this is what the Lord Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. <sup>6</sup>You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it."

<sup>7</sup>This is what the Lord Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. <sup>8</sup>Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored," says the Lord.

## EQUIP

Read Ezra 3:1-6 and Deuteronomy 12:13-14. How did the people of Ezra's time begin obeying the law that God issued to Moses and his people in the Deuteronomy passage?

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According to Exodus 20:23-26, what were the requirements for making altars of worship for God?

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Read Haggai 1:3-8. Why did God say that the people had misplaced priorities, and how could they alleviate the situation?

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## ENCOURAGE

As the rebuilding process began in Ezra 3, the people offered sacrifices to God as instructed in the Law of Moses. On one hand, this may not seem like a big deal. After all, sacrifices were supposed to be offered on a routine basis. On the other hand, the people were obeying God's law to offer up possessions and time to him even as a huge construction project loomed over them. So, they demonstrated faith. What's a seemingly simple way you've lived out your faith lately? Why is it important?

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The Law of Moses clearly warned against idols, and the early apostles clearly warned against following false teachers. The temptation to compromise with or seek comfort from things other than God is as old as humanity itself. Such temptations are particularly strong if we follow all the whims of our culture. We may not make idols of gold or silver today, but in many ways, our priorities, principles, and preferences can stand as rivals beside the altar of God. In Ezra 3, the people did not give in to the intimidating culture around them, but rather obeyed God faithfully. They had their priorities straight... but in later chapters, they would give in to fear for a while. Consider your faith journey right now. In what ways do your priorities match those of God? In what ways might your priorities be distorted by other influences?

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## ENTHUSE

When the Israelite exiles encountered direct opposition from the neighboring peoples, the building of the temple stopped for many years, as Ezra 4 explains. During this time, the prophet Haggai, along with Zechariah, encouraged the exiles to be faithful in rebuilding the temple. Twice in Haggai 1:3-8, God instructed the people, "Give careful thought to your ways." If they did so, then God could "take pleasure in the temple and be honored." This week, give careful thought to your ways. Take some time in prayer and ask God to show you ways you may be placing things in the altar of your heart where God is supposed to be. In what ways can you rebuild your temple (your life) so that God can take pleasure in you and be honored in your life? Write your thoughts here.

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## Something to Consider

*By Amanda Scherer*

Preparing for this lesson, I had to smile at myself. Going through my Bible, I came across some highlights and notes I took in the trenches of grief. Haggai 2:9 reads, "The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house," says the Lord Almighty. "And in this place I will grant peace," declares the Lord Almighty." (NIV)

Next to that, I wrote, "God is my cornerstone, my foundation is strong! My house may crumble, my bricks may be missing in my walls as people come and go in my life, but God is restoring me to be a greater house for Him. 10-10-17"

Around this time, I was standing at my kitchen island talking with a friend—after I suffered a miscarriage. He asked me how I was doing, and I replied, "Not great, but grateful it was early because I couldn't imagine losing an actual child." My friend looked at me with compassion in his eyes and asked me why I felt my unborn baby didn't deserve the same grief as a born one.

At that moment, I realized how the world had influenced my belief system. I wouldn't let myself feel the full weight of my grief because somewhere buried deep down under my pro-life beliefs I had accepted the lie that the unborn is less valuable than the born.

I share this story not to open the topic of when life begins or the topic of abortion, but because it got me thinking about authentic faith and submission to God's word in my life. What I am saying is, my actions did not line up with what I proclaimed to personally believe. As I began to ponder this, I began recognizing more and more buried lies that didn't line up with the belief system I claimed.

These were simple things like what I believed about the character of God. How does he interact with people and in this world? What is my purpose in his call for my life? What is the purpose of the church and my responsibility to God in it? The inconsistencies I found were not blatantly opposing God in my life like the gold and silver images God forbade in Deuteronomy. However, they were opposed enough to blind me from knowing the true nature of God's character. They robbed me of the beauty of God's love for me. The lies weakened the precious intimacy of relationships, first with him and then with others. What I came to realize was that I had built my faith on flawed human relationships and not on my relationship with the unflawed God.

So when my expectations were not always met by God's people, I took my anger and frustration out on him. Since this time of my life, I have met Jesus

through the pages of my Bible. I have walked through the history of my faith with the Old Testament forefathers and the Israelite monarchy. I have been captivated by the words of the prophets and what was going on during the times they prophesied. I can assure you that God has resurrected my dry bones of faith.

It hasn't been easy. It hurt a lot. There were moments when I was angry at the words I read. There were tears of joy and tears of grief, and even some doubt that I did not expect. It was in those moments that I had to pray. It was in those moments I had to carefully ponder (sometimes for days or weeks) what I was reading and how I was to understand it.

As you work through your Enthuse questions this week, I invite you to join me in asking yourself three questions: What do I believe? Why do I believe that? How does this belief affect other areas of my belief system? Reflect on these questions in prayer.

## EQUIP THOUGHTS

*Read Ezra 3:1-6 and Deuteronomy 12:13-14. How did the people of Ezra's time begin obeying the law that God issued to Moses and his people in the Deuteronomy passage?* The first step of obedience was to begin building an altar in the temple ruins so that community sacrifices could resume upon returning to the Promised Land. They followed God's instructions to only sacrifice in the place he designated (in this case, the temple).

*According to Exodus 20:23-26, what were the requirements for making altars of worship for God?* God gave these instructions for creating an altar to worship him:

1. It should be built in the place God chose.
2. The altar itself was to be made of natural materials. If it was constructed of stone, tools were not to be used on it.
3. It should not be constructed with steps. Steps would place the priests high up, where they might be indecently exposed.
4. Pagan idols should never be made or share a space with God's altar.

*Read Haggai 1:3-8. Why did God say that the people had misplaced priorities, and how could they alleviate the situation?* God declared that the people were trying to build extravagant houses for themselves, yet all their efforts would be futile because they had not yet built his house, the temple. To fix this, they needed to realign their priorities to God's by building the temple first. By doing so, they would honor God.

# FAITH 04

ESTHER 4, 5:1-8, & 7

OCT 23  
2022

Be faithful  
where God  
puts you.

## INTRODUCTION TO ESTHER

The book of Esther recounts a dramatic event in history, one that could have potentially wiped out the Jews, God's chosen people through whom Jesus would be born. However, God carefully acted behind the scenes to prevent such a tragedy. He used faithful people whom he put in all the right places to rescue his chosen ones. We highly recommend committing yourself to reading all ten chapters of Esther, but this guide will focus on the major events where Esther and her cousin Mordecai demonstrated their faith. Let's take a look at what led up to those occasions.

The book covers events that took place around 480 BC. Thanks to the decree of Cyrus, an earlier Persian king, Jews had been allowed to leave Babylon and return to their homelands. Some travelled back shortly after the decree was issued in 539 BC, about 60 years earlier, as the book of Ezra explains. However, many Jews, especially the ones who prospered during the captivity, chose to stay right where they were. Two such people were Mordecai, who was a palace official, and Esther, an orphan he raised like his own daughter. Since Esther was a beautiful woman, King Xerxes I chose her to be one of his wives. She found so much favor with him that he made her queen, not knowing that she was a Jew.

Meanwhile, Mordecai served the king faithfully. Yet, he refused to bow down before Haman, the king's highest-ranking official. Haman was outraged and convinced the king that a certain people group was rebellious and needed to be eliminated. Unbeknownst to the impulsive king, those people were the Jews. So, he allowed Haman to issue a decree in his name that ordered officials around Persia to annihilate all the Jews on a certain day the following year. That's where Esther 4, our first reading, picks up. As we'll find in the passages to come, God used the faithfulness of Esther and Mordecai to rescue his people.

### Esther 4 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup>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. <sup>2</sup>But he went only as far as the king's gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it. <sup>3</sup>In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

<sup>4</sup>When Esther's maids and eunuchs came and told her about Mordecai, she was in great distress. She sent clothes for him to put on instead of his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. <sup>5</sup>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.

<sup>6</sup>So Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate. <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain it to her, and he told him to urge her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.

<sup>9</sup>Hathach went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said. <sup>10</sup>Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, <sup>11</sup>"All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that he be put to death. The only exception to this is for the king to extend the gold scepter to him and spare his life. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king."

<sup>12</sup>When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, <sup>13</sup>he sent back this answer: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. <sup>14</sup>For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"

<sup>15</sup>Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: <sup>16</sup>"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."

<sup>17</sup>So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions.

### Esther 5:1-8 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup>On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the palace, in front of the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the hall, facing the entrance. <sup>2</sup>When he saw Queen Esther standing in the court, he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold scepter that was in his hand. So Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter.

<sup>3</sup>Then the king asked, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you."

<sup>4</sup>"If it pleases the king," replied Esther, "let the king, together with Haman, come today to a banquet I have prepared for him."

<sup>5</sup>"Bring Haman at once," the king said, "so that we may do what Esther asks." So the king and Haman went to the banquet Esther had prepared. <sup>6</sup>As they were drinking wine, the king again asked Esther, "Now what is your petition? It will be given you. And what is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted."

<sup>7</sup>Esther replied, "My petition and my request is this: <sup>8</sup>If the king regards me with favor and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for them. Then I will answer the king's question."

### Esther 7 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup>So the king and Haman went to dine with Queen Esther, <sup>2</sup>and as they were drinking wine on that second day, the king again asked, "Queen Esther, what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted."

<sup>3</sup>Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have found favor with you, O king, and if it pleases your majesty, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request. <sup>4</sup>For I and my people have been sold for destruction and slaughter and annihilation. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king."

<sup>5</sup>King Xerxes asked Queen Esther, "Who is he? Where is the man who has dared to do such a thing?"

<sup>6</sup>Esther said, "The adversary and enemy is this vile Haman." Then Haman was terrified before the king and queen. <sup>7</sup>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.

<sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>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!" <sup>10</sup>So they hanged Haman on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the king's fury subsided.

## EQUIP

Read Esther 4. Even in the midst of his grief, how did Mordecai show confidence in God's faithfulness to his people? What fear did he help Esther to overcome?

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Read Esther 5:1-8. By boldly approaching the king even though she had not been invited to do so, how did Esther begin carrying out the plan to save the Jews?

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Read Esther 7. How did Esther demonstrate wisdom and courage during this event? What was the outcome of her faithful obedience?

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## ENCOURAGE

If you go on to read the rest of Esther, you'll find that the Jews were able to defeat the very swarms of people who had vowed to eliminate them. The faithfulness of Esther and Mordecai are honored to this day. Remaining obedient to God through everything they faced couldn't have been easy. Mordecai refused to bow down to the wicked Haman, and Esther faced possible execution if the king simply didn't feel like welcoming her into his room uninvited. Have you ever acted in obedience to God even when you faced the possibility of being embarrassed, mocked, or even cut off from a family member or friend? What were the results?

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One of the key lines from the book of Esther is in 4:14. Mordecai asks Esther, a formerly orphaned Jew who "just happened" to ascend to royalty, "Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this?" (NLT) Clearly, Mordecai didn't think it was a coincidence that a Jewish woman had close ties to a tyrannical king who was about to eliminate God's people. Rather, she had been blessed with an amazing opportunity, but it was her choice whether or not to use it. Throughout history, God has used ordinary people to accomplish incredible things—just look at Jesus' first disciples for another example. How can this be a source of encouragement as you consider ways that God can use you right where you are?

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## ENTHUSE

For Esther, her opportunity to serve the Lord became clear once the Jewish people were in danger. The specific way we should carry out God's will today might not be so obvious, but our general mission as Christ followers has always been to carry out the words of Jesus. Simply put, we are to love God and to love others. We do this by trusting the Lord as we walk with the people in our sphere of influence, guiding them to a deeper relationship with Christ. This week, consider any opportunities God is giving you right now to begin that mission, to recommit yourself to that mission, or to live out that mission in a new way. No matter where you are in life, God's eager to use you for a purpose. Pray that God would reveal to you what your next step is. Once he's revealed it to you, pray that you won't hesitate: instead, take that next step this week! Use this space below to reflect on your prayers and how to take that next step.

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## Something to Consider

By Bobby Miller

The Bible covers thousands of years of history, so it obviously focuses on what we would consider the grand, pivotal moments the past. For instance, God liberated his people from the bondage of slavery in Egypt, giving them a new land and a new covenant in his own name. Yes, the events Moses witnessed and participated in were a big deal. This week's reading covered another major make-or-break moment for the entire Jewish race, the race from whom our savior would be born. Thankfully, Esther and Mordecai saw that their people would be protected.

However, throughout those thousands of years that the Bible covers, many other people faithfully served God. Some were priests who faithfully carried out their religious duties. Some were parents who faithfully taught their children God's laws. Some were warriors who faithfully defended their nation. Some were unnamed prophets who faithfully shared God's messages for the people. The list goes on.

The point is, from the beginning of time, a whole lot of ordinary, unsung people have been faithful to God. Just because you might not be a major player in world history doesn't mean you're insignificant. After all, as Jesus taught us, God loves you enough to leave the ninety-nine sheep to find you. And if that's not a big enough deal for you, just look at a cross.

We didn't earn that love, but if we're truly grateful for it, then we'll live by it. We'll find ourselves loving and forgiving others as God has loved and forgiven us. We'll find that we want to serve God in his mission of reaching out to those who haven't submitted themselves to him yet. But if we aren't a major figure like Abraham or Moses, how are we supposed to know if God's calling us to do anything? Should we wait for some miraculous communication from above, maybe a prophetic dream telling us what to do?

Nah. You probably won't get to play a part in God's mission for the world if you wait for something huge. Instead, like Esther did, maybe you should take a good look at where God has placed you. I bet he put you there for a reason.

But, unlike Esther, you're probably not a queen who can speak directly to one of the most powerful monarchs in the world. At least, I've never met anybody like that at Mt. Carmel. So how are you supposed to know if God has a plan for you as you go about your everyday life?

Well, speaking of Mt. Carmel, let's talk about how I began serving here back in December of 2015. What made me decide to start volunteering? Did I listen to one of those sermons where it felt like Didi was talking directly to me? Did I have an epiphany during a prayer on a mountaintop? Did a cousin

of mine warn me that our people would be annihilated unless I took action?

Nah. I'd just read the Bible a lot and heard enough sermons to know that Christians are called to serve in God's community. I realized I wasn't doing that, so I decided to change that. On one of those little response cards, I pointed out that I was a writer and editor, and I wondered if those skills could somehow help the church.

From there, Tim Peace met with me, and we got to know each other. I started helping with the discussion guides that small groups use to delve deeper into the Bible while growing closer to each other. Tim, of course, would go on to serve God at Markle Church of Christ—bless him for taking that wonderful opportunity to help others find our Lord. But I'm still here years and years later thanks to writing a few sentences on a response card. I've gotten to serve Mt. Carmel in other ways too, and it's been a blessing to go from an attendee to a member of the family.

So, what opportunity has God given you, and how are you going to take it?

But wait. If you're like me, you read questions like that and instantly start coming up with reasons why things won't work. Let's talk about some of those reasons, ones that have held me back in the past too.

Hypothetical Hesitation #1: "I'm too busy."

Believe me, I know that feeling. There have always been lots of fun things I don't really have the time or energy to do. But I, for one, have faith that serving God in practical ways should be a top priority of mine. Many other members of Mt. Carmel have made the same decision, which is why we can host worship services every week, offer classes, organize outings, host small groups, and so much more. It's worth it. And even if you think your next step might be too time-consuming, like reading the Bible more or volunteering more, you might be surprised. Just try taking that step, and God could very well ensure you have the time you need.

Hypothetical Hesitation #2: "I don't have any useful skills."

Yep, I know that feeling too. Sure, I can write and edit stuff, but it feels like less and less people read anything longer than a tweet these days, so can my words really be useful for the church? Well, if you haven't resorted to skimming this ultra long devotional yet, my words have apparently offered you something. And I bet you have something to offer as well. After all, the apostle Paul spoke of the church as a body with many different parts that perform different functions (see 1 Corinthians 12:12-27), and they're all necessary for Mt. Carmel to do what it does. Ask what you can do. Even if it's not a grandiose job, I bet it'll help everyone out.

Hypothetical Hesitation #3: "I'm not mature enough in my faith to help other people with theirs."

Yeah, I've felt that before too. I was still going through depression back when I jotted down my message on that response card. Thanks to that depression, I still had lots of doubts floating through my head. It's tempting to tell yourself that if you're not growing in faith, then you have no business trying to serve God. But here's an amazing truth that's easy to overlook: by serving God, you'll often find your faith in him grow. Yes, serving God nurtures your faith. James, the half-brother of Jesus, famously declared that faith without works is dead. Well, if you feel your faith is dying, then maybe some works can give it some life support. I'm not saying that serving others is a substitute for a personal relationship with God, but I am saying that loving others can help you love God.

Whew. I can't cover every possible hesitation you might have. But if you have any doubts, then take them to God in prayer. He knows your situation better than I do—and better than even you do.

Let me ask again: What opportunity has God given you, and how are you going to take it?

Maybe you've examined yourself and realized that you don't feel like you know God very well. In that case, maybe your next step is to pray more and start reading the Bible. Just fifteen minutes a day every day can do wonders. Or maybe you've taken a look at your checkbook and realized that you don't share your resources with others. In that case, maybe your next step is to begin tithing, as God instructs in the Bible. Or maybe you've reflected on your relationship with the church and discovered you have time and skill to offer it. In that case, maybe your next step is to ask where we could use some volunteers. Or maybe you know somebody who could use some love and encouragement. In that case, maybe your next step is to let them know you care about them. If it comes from the heart, a phone call or a handwritten letter can do wonders. If you're feeling especially bold, invite the person over for dinner.

What's your next step? There will be a whole lot of different answers throughout our congregation. But there's one thing I'm sure of: no matter how far along you are on your faith journey, there are still more steps you can take.

I, for one, am well aware that writing and editing material for the church isn't the only responsibility God has entrusted me with. As I'm conjuring up this guide, there are people in my life, near and dear to me, who need to hear a big question. It's one I'm afraid to ask. It's simply, "Do you believe in Jesus?" But God placed them in my life for a purpose. Introducing them to the faith could be one of his reasons. So, even though I'm nervous about the responses I might get, I need to ask my loved ones what their relationship with God is like.

That's my next step. What's yours?

## EQUIP THOUGHTS

***Read Esther 4. Even in the midst of his grief, how did Mordecai show confidence in God's faithfulness to his people? What fear did he help Esther to overcome?***

Mordecai was in grief after learning that Haman had convinced the king to issue a decree that ordered the extermination of a certain people group, which turned out to be the Jews. However, he didn't give up. He reached out to Esther, hoping that she would help. Amazingly enough, he was confident that, even if Esther failed to protect the Jews, their people would still be delivered in some other way (see 4:14). But Esther did have a reason to be worried. Persian law dictated that, if the king felt like it, he could execute anybody who approached him without permission. (If you read the rest of the book, you'll find that King Xerxes was an impulsive drunk, so Esther had no guarantee that he would be in the mood to accept her.) After Mordecai explained how dire the situation was, Esther agreed to help, asking the Jews to fast on her behalf, much as we might ask others to pray for us.

***Read Esther 5:1-8. By boldly approaching the king even though she had not been invited to do so, how did Esther begin carrying out the plan to save the Jews?***

Mordecai was in grief after learning that Haman had convinced the king to issue a decree that ordered the extermination of a certain people group, which turned out to be the Jews. However, he didn't give up. He reached out to Esther, hoping that she would help. Amazingly enough, he was confident that, even if Esther failed to protect the Jews, their people would still be delivered in some other way (see 4:14). But Esther did have a reason to be worried. Persian law dictated that, if the king felt like it, he could execute anybody who approached him without permission. (If you read the rest of the book, you'll find that King Xerxes was an impulsive drunk, so Esther had no guarantee that he would be in the mood to accept her.) After Mordecai explained how dire the situation was, Esther agreed to help, asking the Jews to fast on her behalf, much as we might ask others to pray for us.

***Read Esther 5:1-8. By boldly approaching the king even though she had not been invited to do so, how did Esther begin carrying out the plan to save the Jews?***

Esther did not impulsively run to the king and tell him to overturn his violent decree. Even though the king was happy to see her, she took things one step at a time. She sought his favor by holding a banquet for him and Haman, the very man who wanted the Jews dead. She further appeased them by inviting them to another banquet, the one at which she would give the king her bold request concerning the decree.

***Read Esther 7. How did Esther demonstrate wisdom and courage during this event? What was the outcome of her faithful obedience?***

Esther was modest during this ordeal, not blaming the king for the impulsive decree to kill the Jews. She even claimed that he wouldn't bother the king over a "small issue" like her people being sold into slavery. Rather, she told the king that the wicked Haman was to blame (he was the one who convinced the king to make the decree, after all). She even told the king that "her people" were the targets, meaning that she admitted to being a Jew who would be under attack in this decree. Despite Haman's resistance, the king had him killed for his vile actions. By having the man who plotted against the Jews in the first place executed, the rest of the steps necessary to liberate them could take place, as the remainder of the book covers.

# FAITH 05

NEHEMIAH 1 AND 2:1-10

OCT 30  
2022

Faithfulness  
to God is  
built on  
courage.

## INTRODUCTION TO NEHEMIAH

Nehemiah continues the account found in Ezra. It completes telling the story of the Israelites returning to Jerusalem, returning to God, and rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. For this to happen, they needed people who were willing to take faith-filled action. You see, despite their initial enthusiasm, the Israelites were starting to waver when it came to rebuilding Jerusalem. In the passages for today, we'll find that Nehemiah, who served the Persian king while in captivity, was deeply concerned for his people as they went through the rebuilding process.

### Nehemiah 1 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup>The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah:

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, <sup>2</sup>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.

<sup>3</sup>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."

<sup>4</sup>When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. <sup>5</sup>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, <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

<sup>8</sup>Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, <sup>9</sup>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.'

<sup>10</sup>"They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. <sup>11</sup>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."

I was cupbearer to the king.

### Nehemiah 2:1-10 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup>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; <sup>2</sup>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, <sup>3</sup>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?"

<sup>4</sup>The king said to me, "What is it you want?"

Then I prayed to the God of heaven, <sup>5</sup>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."

<sup>6</sup>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.

<sup>7</sup>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? <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>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.

<sup>10</sup>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.

## EQUIP

Read Nehemiah 1. Why was Nehemiah concerned for the safety of his fellow people, and how did he respond once he heard about their predicament?

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Read Nehemiah 2:1-5. How did King Artaxerxes realize something was wrong with his servant? How did Nehemiah explain his feelings to the king?

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Read Nehemiah 2:6-10. What did Nehemiah request from the king? According to him, why was the king generous enough to grant the favors?

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## ENCOURAGE

Many heroes of the Bible, whether in the Old Testament or the New, earn their title of hero simply by noticing something's wrong, asking for God's help to fix it, and then carrying out his orders. Nehemiah heard the walls of Jerusalem, essential for its protection, were in disrepair, so he took action. Centuries earlier, David learned that Goliath was defying the armies of Israel and God himself, so he took action (1 Samuel 17). Centuries later, church leaders saw that needy widows were overlooked, so they also took action (Acts 6:1-7). While you might not feel called to fight a giant or organize efforts to feed a large group of widows, what is a wrong you have felt the need to address recently or have taken action to address? These issues could be something in your own life you would like to improve, or

perhaps something in your family, neighborhood, church, or school. If you have taken action, how is it going, or how did it go? If you have not taken action yet, what do you believe is holding you back?

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As a mere servant to the king, Nehemiah was afraid to share his personal problems, yet he ultimately told the king how he was feeling, which put an amazing rescue effort into place. How can remembering his example, along with other stories of courage in the Bible, encourage you to step out and share what you believe needs to be addressed? Like Nehemiah, how can praying before asking for help give you the courage to ask for everything you need?

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## ENTHUSE

As we read the account of Nehemiah taking on the challenge to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, the story of David fighting Goliath, or the story of the overlooked widows receiving help, we can see there is not necessarily a linear approach to our being faithful. Some people overcome fear immediately and take that first step, some wait to be asked, and some need things to be pointed out to them. But one thing they all do is to look to God for the courage to follow his calling. Think about areas where God is calling you. Take a moment to write them down. Now, list things you can do that will help you take on those challenges—perhaps prayer or speaking with others could help. If you're having trouble identifying something God has called you to do, then consider asking other members of the church body for help in finding a way to better serve him.

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## Something to Consider

By Arlan Howard

In the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, three particularly faithful people answered God's call to restore their homeland. One man was to lead people back to Jerusalem, one man was to bring people back to knowing the word of God, and one man was called to rebuild the physical structure of the city. Each one of these gentlemen, Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, had issues to overcome, and each one was successful at some point in their calling.

Unfortunately, each one fell short of fulfilling their objective perfectly. But I believe we can still learn a few things from their stories. We find that our plans don't have to be perfect before we start our journey to answer God's call. They just need to be faithful to God's way of doing things. The books also show us that, even if we have early success, we should always check in with God and fellow believers along the way to help ensure we're still on the right path. Most importantly, we must remember that only one person, Jesus, has obeyed God perfectly, so we must remain faithful to him as we act. Otherwise, even if we act with good intentions, we may veer off-course, missing God's greatest goals for us.

Let us stay faithful to him every step of the way.

## EQUIP THOUGHTS

***Read Nehemiah 1. Why was Nehemiah concerned for the safety of his fellow people, and how did he respond once he heard about their predicament?***

Nehemiah received the news that the people of Israel/Judah had not yet rebuilt the walls surrounding Jerusalem, which were essential to protecting God's city and people. He mourned, fasted, and prayed to God. In his prayer, Nehemiah appealed to God's goodness. He confessed that he and the people had sinned, and he asked for God's mercy. He pointed out that, while God promised punishment for those who disobeyed him, he also promised restoration for those who turned back to him in repentance. These promises date back to the Law of Moses (see Deuteronomy 30).

***Read Nehemiah 2:1-5. How did King Artaxerxes realize something was wrong with his servant? How did Nehemiah explain his feelings to the king?***

Nehemiah was the cupbearer for the king of Persia, so he not only served drinks to the king but also made sure nothing the king drank was poisoned. While this meant Nehemiah was a high-ranking, trusted servant, he was still just a servant. Bothering the king with his personal problems may have been improper. Yet, when King Artaxerxes noticed something was troubling his servant, he asked what was going on. After all, it was odd to see his servant wearing a sad face while standing before royalty. Nehemiah explained that he couldn't help but look sad when his homeland was desolate and in danger. He prayed to God for strength, and then he made the bold request to go back and aid in the rebuilding process.

***Read Nehemiah 2:6-10. What did Nehemiah request from the king? According to him, why was the king generous enough to grant the favors?***

Nehemiah knew that rebuilding Jerusalem and its walls wouldn't be an easy task. So, he asked the king for recommendation letters that would allow him to get the materials his people needed as well as the protection necessary to stay safe in the midst of opposition. After all, as verse 10 mentions, some people were indeed hostile to those carrying out God's will. However, based on verse 8, it's clear that Nehemiah saw God's hand at work in the king's generous offers.

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# FAITHFUL

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