

FEBRUARY

DEVOTIONAL JOURNAL 2017

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LORD, "For he is good,
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EZRA 3:11 (ESV)

COVENANT EFC

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MEMORY FOCUS

EZRA & HAGGAI (ESV)

2017

JANUARY

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

EZRA 1:1

FEBRUARY

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

EZRA 3:11

MARCH

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

EZRA 5:5

APRIL

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

EZRA 5:11

MAY

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

HAGGAI 1:4

JUNE

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

HAGGAI 1:6

JULY

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

HAGGAI 2:4

AUGUST

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

EZRA 7:10

SEPTEMBER

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

EZRA 7:28B

OCTOBER

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

EZRA 8:31B

NOVEMBER

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

EZRA 9:13

DECEMBER

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

EZRA 10:4

FOREWORD BY SENIOR PASTORS

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

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

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

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

A Firm FOUNDATION in God

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

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

A Bold FAITH in God’s Faithfulness

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

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

A Burning Focus Towards FRUITFULNESS for God

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

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

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

In Christ,

Rev Tony Yeo and Rev Tan Kay Kiong

GUIDE TO USING THIS DEVOTIONAL JOURNAL

1 Prepare your heart in God's presence

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

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

SOMETHING TO PONDER...

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

WHAT'S NEW IN 2017?

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

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

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

WORSHIP SONGS

JANUARY - FEBRUARY

THIS I BELIEVE (THE CREED)

Verse 1

Our Father everlasting
The all creating One
God Almighty
Through Your Holy Spirit
Conceiving Christ the Son
Jesus our Saviour

Chorus 1

I believe in God our Father
I believe in Christ the Son
I believe in the Holy Spirit
Our God is three in One
I believe in the resurrection
That we will rise again
For I believe in the Name of Jesus

Verse 2

Our Judge and our Defender
Suffered and crucified
Forgiveness is in You
Descended into darkness
You rose in glorious life
Forever seated high

Bridge

I believe in You
I believe You rose again
I believe that Jesus Christ is Lord

Chorus 2

I believe in life eternal
I believe in the virgin birth
I believe in the saints' communion
And in Your holy Church
I believe in the resurrection
When Jesus comes again
For I believe in the Name of Jesus

Ben Fielding | Matt Crocker
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AMAZING GRACE (MY CHAINS ARE GONE)

Verse 1

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found
Was blind, but now I see

Verse 2

T'was grace that taught my heart to fear
And grace my fears relieved
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed

Chorus

My chains are gone, I've been set free
My God, my Saviour has ransomed me
And like a flood His mercy rains
Unending love, amazing grace

Verse 3

The Lord has promised good to me
His Word my hope secures
He will my shield and portion be
As long as life endures

Verse 4

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow
The sun forbear to shine
But God, who call'd me here below
Will be forever mine

Chris Tomlin | John Newton | Louie Giglio
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10,000 REASONS (BLESS THE LORD)

Chorus

Bless the Lord, O my soul
 O my soul
 Worship His holy name
 Sing like never before
 O my soul
 I'll worship Your holy name

Verse 1

The sun comes up it's a new day dawning
 It's time to sing Your song again
 Whatever may pass and whatever lies before me
 Let me be singing when the evening comes

Verse 2

You're rich in love and You're slow to anger
 Your name is great and Your heart is kind
 For all Your goodness I will keep on singing
 Ten thousand reasons for my heart to find

Verse 3

And on that day when my strength is failing
 The end draws near and my time has come
 Still my soul will sing Your praise unending
 Ten thousand years and then forevermore

Ending

I'll worship Your holy name
 Worship Your holy name
 Worship Your holy name

Jonas Myrin | Matt Redman

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THE GREATNESS OF YOU

Chorus

Jesus, we lift up Your name

Verse

I wanna sing of Your love
 I wanna sing of Your mercy
 I wanna tell the whole world
 Of the greatness of You

So I'll sing of Your love
 And I'll sing of Your mercy
 And I'll tell the whole world
 Of the greatness of You

Bridge

Your name is higher than the heavens
 Greater than the nations
 Jesus

Erik Cooper | Nathan LaGrange

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OUR GOD

Verse 1

Water You turned into wine
 Opened the eyes of the blind
 There's no one like You
 None like You

Verse 2

Into the darkness You shine
 Out of the ashes we rise
 There's no one like You
 None like You

Chorus

Our God is greater
 Our God is stronger
 God You are higher than any other
 Our God is healer
 Awesome in power, our God, our God

Bridge

And if our God is for us
 Then who could ever stop us?
 And if our God is with us
 Then what could stand against?
 And if our God is for us
 Then who could ever stop us?
 And if our God is with us
 Then what could stand against?
 (Then) what could stand against?

Chris Tomlin | Jesse Reeves | Jonas Myrin | Matt Redman
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FOREVER

Verse 1

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

Verse 2

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

Pre-chorus

Sing praise, sing praise
 Sing praise, sing praise

Chorus

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

Verse 3

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

Bridge

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

Chris Tomlin
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HOSANNA (PRAISE IS RISING)

Verse 1

Praise is rising
 Eyes are turning to You
 We turn to You
 Hope is stirring
 Hearts are yearning for You
 We long for You
 'Cause when we see You
 We find strength to face the day
 In Your presence
 All our fears are washed away
 (Washed away)

Chorus

Hosanna, hosanna
 You are the God who saves us
 Worthy of all our praises
 Hosanna, hosanna
 Come have Your way among us
 We welcome You here, Lord Jesus

Verse 2

Hear the sound of
 Hearts returning to You
 We turn to You
 In Your Kingdom
 Broken lives are made new
 You make all things new
 'Cause when we see You
 We find strength to face the day
 In Your presence
 All our fears are washed away

Ending

Hosanna, hosanna

WHOM SHALL I FEAR

Verse 1

You hear me when I call
 You are my morning song
 Though darkness fills the night
 It cannot hide the light

Whom shall I fear
 You crush the enemy underneath my feet
 You are my sword and shield
 Though troubles linger still
 Whom shall I fear

Chorus

I know Who goes before me
 I know Who stands behind
 The God of angel armies is always by my side
 The One who reigns forever
 He is a friend of mine
 The God of angel armies is always by my side

Verse 2

My strength is in Your name
 For You alone can save
 You will deliver me
 Yours is the victory
 Whom shall I fear
 Whom shall I fear
 (Whom shall I fear)

Bridge

(And) nothing formed against me shall stand
 You hold the whole world in Your hands
 I'm holding on to Your promises
 You are faithful
 You are faithful

HOW GREAT THOU ART

Verse 1

O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder
Consider all the works Thy hand hath made
I see the stars I hear the mighty thunder
Thy pow'r throughout the universe displayed

Chorus

Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee
How great Thou art! How great Thou art!
Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee
How great Thou art! How great Thou art!

Verse 2

When through the woods, and forest glades I wander
And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees
When I look down, from lofty mountain grandeur
And hear the brook, and feel the gentle breeze

Verse 3

And when I think, that God, His Son not sparing
Sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in
That on the Cross, my burden gladly bearing
He bled and died to take away my sin

Verse 4

When Christ shall come, with shout of acclamation
And take me home, what joy shall fill my heart
Then shall I bow in humble adoration
And there proclaim, my God, how great Thou art

Stuart Wesley Keene Hine
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VICTOR'S CROWN

Verse 1

You are always fighting for us
Heaven's angels all around
My delight is found in knowing
That You wear the Victor's crown

You're my help and my defender
You're my Saviour and my friend
By Your grace I live and breathe
To worship You

Verse 2

At the mention of Your greatness
In Your Name I will bow down
In Your presence fear is silent
For You wear the Victor's crown

Let Your glory fill this temple
Let Your power overflow
By Your grace I live and breathe
To worship You

Chorus

Hallelujah
You have overcome
You have overcome
Hallelujah
Jesus, You have overcome the world

Verse 3

You are ever interceding
As the lost become the found
You can never be defeated
For You wear the Victor's crown

You are Jesus the Messiah
You're the Hope of all the world
By Your grace I live and breathe
To worship You

Verse 4

Every high thing must come down
Every stronghold shall be broken
You wear the Victor's crown
You overcome, you overcome.

At the cross the work was finished
You were buried in the ground
But the grave could not contain You
For You wear the Victor's crown

Bridge

Every high thing must come down
Every stronghold shall be broken
You wear the Victor's crown
You overcome, you overcome

Darlene Zschech | Israel Houghton | Kari Jobe
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THE CHURCH BEYOND

PRAY FOR CHINA

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

After 30 years of persecution, the churches in China continue to thrive! God has used Chinese leaders in the following ways: Mao Zedong to refine the Church in their faith, Deng Xiaoping to give freedom to Christians to worship and Hu Jintao to link Chinese Christians to other Christians around the world with the freedom to travel, migrate, have Internet access, etc.

Praise God:

- For His love and faithfulness to the Chinese people



Pray:

- That God will continue to lead them to witness to every level of society, both in cities and rural areas
- For good Bible-based teaching in churches
- That there will be witnesses among the many ethnic minorities who often do not have any Christians in their community
- For Covenant EFC’s work with the urban population in a large Chinese city, which has led to the starting of a church there. Pray for God to break through the lives of His disciples, that their transformed lives will lead them to be powerful witnesses for Christ.
- For Covenant EFC missionaries working among the minorities. After many years, their work is bearing fruit — the disciples are growing and actively sharing the Gospel. Pray for their safety because the work is highly sensitive. Pray that His disciples be fruitful and witness with zeal.

WEDNESDAY, 1 FEBRUARY 2017

Brokenness: Recognising God's Sovereignty over Our Lives

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 30:1-2; 31:1-16

OBSERVATION

What was Jacob's life like when he was working for his uncle Laban, and where was God in this situation?

Deeper Reflection

The barren Rachel threatened to die if Jacob did not give her children, to which Jacob angrily retorted, **"Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?"** (vv.1-2). Jacob recognised the sovereignty of God in life's situations. God's sovereignty means that He is in full control even when His people go through adversity and suffering. It is remarkable how Jacob¹, who years ago had "hunted" and "ambushed" his hunter brother, Esau, was now himself deceived and ambushed by his uncle Laban several times over (Gen 31:7, 41). Jacob worked hard for Laban and suffered much hardship (Gen 31:6, 38-42). God was fully aware that Laban had been exploiting Jacob (Gen 31:12). But it seems that God allowed those hardships so as to bring about brokenness in Jacob's life. When we are full of ourselves and stubbornly self-centred, God works to break the hard outer shell surrounding our hearts and expose the pride, rebellion, selfishness and independence within. They prevent us from surrendering to God, with the result that we cannot be all that God wants us to be. God wants us to learn to be utterly dependent on Him, so that He can work mightily in and through us. Suffering seems to be one of the best ways for God's people to learn submission and obedience to God, and reliance and dependence on Him. As one writer noted, "The Christian is one who experiences life through death. Union with God is always through Christ in the world with all its sufferings, temptations and weaknesses. Knowledge of God is a knowledge that "wounds", rather than a knowledge that gives a sense of superiority or control over things."²

APPLICATION

In recognising God's sovereignty in my life, how should I respond to the adversities and sufferings that He allows me to experience?

PRAYER

Sovereign Lord, reign in my life. I recognise that my heart is deceitful above all else and desperately sick. I often even deceive myself into thinking that I am in control and can determine my own future. Grant me the true perspective not to boast in my wisdom, strength or riches, but let me boast that I understand and know You, that You are the LORD who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth.³ In Jesus' name, amen.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

¹ The name "Jacob" in Hebrew means "heel-holder" or "supplanter". The verb is often used to refer to those who ambush unsuspecting people, and implies cunning and deceit.

² Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, Rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley, 1990) quoted in footnote 26, *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life*, by Simon Chan.

³ Jeremiah 9:23-24.

THURSDAY, 2 FEBRUARY 2017

Brokenness: Receiving God's Power for Our Transformation

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 32:1-12, 22-32

OBSERVATION

What surprises you about the way the man wrestled with Jacob? (vv.24-31)

Deeper Reflection

A severe crisis has a way of driving us to God. If God does not show up, we are done for. In Genesis 32, Jacob faced such a crisis: Esau was coming to meet him with 400 men. A fearful Jacob prayed to God for deliverance (vv.9-12). God responded by weakening Jacob, not strengthening him. God provided a wrestling match that left Jacob limping as he approached his brother. Jacob's initial plan was to escape with one camp in the event that Esau attacked him. But now he could not run from Esau even if he tried! He was totally dependent on the Lord to deliver him. Wrestling with the man was not a dream or a vision; it was a physical fight with profound spiritual lessons for Jacob. All his life, Jacob believed that his adversaries were Esau and Laban. Actually, Jacob was his own greatest adversary. God had to wrestle with Jacob to reveal this to him. God could have crippled Jacob right at the start, but did not do so until it was clear that Jacob would not yield (v.25). The flesh does not die easily! Jacob had to see for himself how strong his self-will really was. God's breaking process reveals to us the power of our flesh so that we may depend on God totally and receive His blessings of a transformed life – symbolised by a new name! God helped Jacob to see that you don't use God, but instead submit to Him. When we submit to God, He blesses us beyond our expectations.

APPLICATION

In a present crisis in your life, how can you stop fighting with God and instead submit to Him, knowing that God wants to bless and transform you?

PRAYER

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

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

FRIDAY, 3 FEBRUARY 2017

Brokenness: Choosing to Cling to God for Life

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 32:22-32; Matthew 26:69-75

OBSERVATION

Why did Jacob refuse to let the man go?

Deeper Reflection

After dislocating Jacob's hip, the man said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But the wounded Jacob clung to him tenaciously, saying "I will not let you go unless you bless me." Such is the irony. Like Jacob, we will not cling to God until we are desperate, until we have exhausted every bit of self-dependence. Once Jesus predicted to His disciples, "You will all fall away because of Me this night" (Matt 26:31). Peter rebutted with pious arrogance, "Though they all fall away because of You, I will never fall away", and "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny You!" (Matt 26:33, 35). The Lord had to allow Peter to subsequently go through a journey of shameful failure and self-discovery before Peter would cling to the Lord in his brokenness. Attracted by sweet grass, a sheep tends to wander off on its own only to end up on a dangerous precipice. The shepherd would allow the sheep to remain there for days until it becomes so weak that it is unable to stand up, before lowering himself on a rope to rescue the sheep. Before exhaustion, the sheep is so foolish that it would dash off the precipice during an attempted rescue. Likewise, God often has to allow us to become totally helpless so that we choose to cling to Him as our only hope until He blesses us. But that choice is not always taken. Some people choose instead to remain bitter or guilt-ridden — a choice that leads to self-destruction, as in the case of Judas Iscariot (see Matt 27:1-5).

APPLICATION

How is God currently leading you to cling to Him?

PRAYER

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

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for lay leaders:
To always choose to cling to God whether in bad or good times

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

SATURDAY, 4 FEBRUARY 2017

Brokenness: Learning to Love Self for God's Sake

SCRIPTURE

Genesis 32:22-32; Ephesians 5:1-2; Jude 1-2

OBSERVATION

Why did the man ask Jacob for his name? (v.27)

Deeper Reflection

When asked for his name, Jacob replied his opponent, “Jacob”, and together with that name came all its lived-out meaning — the supplanter, the conniver and the schemer. God wanted Jacob to confess not just his name, but his worldly character. Part of the process of knowing God involves knowing ourselves. Until God reveals the power of our sinful nature to us, we tend to think that we are not so bad. As Paul wrote, “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh” (Rom 7:18). We tend to find our significance — who we are — in what we do and the things we possess. In reality, who we are is determined by whose we are. Christ has bought us with His precious blood. We have become God’s children and belong to Him. Therefore, you are significant. And whatever God asks you to do **is** important, whether you are a chauffeur or a chief executive officer. Your new name is “beloved child of God”. God gave Jacob a new name for a brand new start: “Israel”, which means prevailer⁴. To the Hebrews, one’s name reflects one’s character. If **true dependency** is agreeing with God about who He is, then **true humility** is agreeing with God about who you are.⁵ There is a need for us to embrace who God says we are, and therefore to love and accept ourselves for His sake. As Jacob went limping to face Esau, he was more powerful in his own weakness and God’s strength than he could ever have been in his own scheming and strength. Jacob had begun to find his true identity as the beloved of God and to **love self for God’s sake**.⁶

APPLICATION

What is your new name in Christ and what difference should that make in your life?

PRAYER

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

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

⁴ “Israel” either means “he who strives (or prevails) with God” or “God strives (or prevails)”. Both meanings are true: Jacob wrestled with God and prevailed in the sense of hanging on until God blessed him. But, in the first place, God prevailed over Jacob by crippling his stubborn self-dependence.

⁵ Danielle Strickland speaking at Global Leadership Summit 2016 (Singapore location) on *Leadership Interrupted*.

⁶ St. Bernard of Clairvaux in *On Loving God* (http://www.ccel.org/ccel/bernard/loving_god)

SUNDAY, 5 FEBRUARY 2017

SCRIPTURE

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OBSERVATION

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APPLICATION

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PRAYER

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THE PAST WEEK

Review

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

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What gave me life and what drained me?

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How was the Spirit of God at work?

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Reflect

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

Respond

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

FAMILY DEVOTIONAL • WEEK 1 • FEBRUARY 2017

ARE BIBLE STORIES LIKE FAIRY TALES?

Bible stories are true events that really happened.

Scripture: John 21:24-25

★ ACTIVITY BITE

Look up the history of Singapore and name one or two important events that took place before you were born.

★ CHAT TIME

Q1: How do you know if Singapore's historical records are true?

Q2: Do you think God will lie to us about what was written in the Bible? Why or why not?

Q3: What can we learn about God's character from the Bible stories?

★ LEARNING POINT

All the stories in the Bible are true events. Even though they are written by people, God is the real author who inspired them to write. Thus, we always refer to the Bible as God's Word. God will not lie to us about what was written. Many people however do not believe in the Bible because they don't believe that God exists or they find it hard to believe that miracles can take place. God gave us His Word so that we can know who He is. From the stories of how He helps His people or judges those who are wicked, we can learn more about His character. They tell us how we should live our lives so that we will not do what is wrong. The Bible is the book that we should read every day.

★ ACTION POINT

Read a story from the Old Testament. Write down one characteristic of God that you discovered from the story. Record it in your journal so that you can refer to it again.

★ PRAYER POWER

(Ask your children to pray after you.)

Dear God, thank You for giving us the Bible. Help me learn more about You as I read the stories. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

MONDAY, 6 FEBRUARY 2017

Reconstruction: Go Up

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 1:1-5; 2 Kings 25:8-11, 21

OBSERVATION

What can you learn about God from reading verses 1 to 5 in light of 2 Kings 25:8-11, 21?

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Deeper Reflection

The central message of Ezra is: **What man has ruined God can rebuild.** This is **what man has ruined:** The history of Israel as God's covenant people was marked more by unfaithfulness to God than faithfulness; this spanned over some 800 years since the days of the judges (Judg 2:6-12) until the Babylonians conquered Israel and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, and was followed by the exile to Babylon (2 Kin 25:8-11, 21). Exile was the ultimate covenant curse for breaking the covenant with God (Lev 26:27-28, 32-33). Israel's exile was their own doing. They ruined their own lives and their God-given destiny. **God can rebuild:** The exile would be for 70 years, but with God's promise of restoration (Jer 25:8-11; 29:10). Ezra can be broadly outlined as: Reconstruction of the Temple (Ezr 1-6) and Reformation by the Torah⁷ (Ezr 7-10). Ezra begins with King Cyrus' edict: "Let him go up to Jerusalem" (v.3) — the beginning of God restoring His people. It was a redemptive "go up". But it was also a discipleship "go up": "go up and rebuild" God's temple for worship (v.5). No matter how we may have ruined our lives, it is never too much or too late for God to rebuild our lives. The Cross gives us this redemptive hope (cf. Eph 1:7).

APPLICATION

What areas of my life have I ruined that I should hand over to God to rebuild?

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PRAYER

Merciful Lord, I humbly bring to You the broken pieces of my life, recognising that I am to be blamed for these ruins. My only hope of having my life rebuilt is You, whose steadfast love never ceases, whose compassions never fail, but are new every morning, declaring Your great faithfulness. Lord, be gracious to me and rebuild my broken life. Amen.



⁷ The Hebrew word *torah* is frequently translated as "law" — referring to "the law of Moses" (Ezr 7:6) and "the law of the LORD" (Ezr 7:10).

⁸ Lamentations 3:21-23

TUESDAY, 7 FEBRUARY 2017

Reconstruction: Knocked Down

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 4:1-5, 24 with Ezra 1:1-5

OBSERVATION

What observations can you make about God and His people from reading verses 1 to 5 and 24, in light of Ezra 1:1-5?

Deeper Reflection

The first thing the exiles did when they “went up from Babylon to Jerusalem” (Ezr 1:11) was to have a **Celebration (Ezr 3:1-6)**. They built the altar of God to offer sacrifices to Him (Ezr 3:1-2). It was a time of celebration in obedience to God – “as it is written in the law of Moses” (Ezr 3:1-2). **Foundation (Ezr 3:7-13)**: In “the second year” of their return to Jerusalem, Israel “laid the foundation of the temple” (Ezr 3:8, 10-13). **Opposition (Ezr 4:1-23)**: “Go up and rebuild” the temple (Ezr 1:5) was God’s will and call for His people in exile. The whole restoration and reconstruction movement was a divine initiative. It was God who first “stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus” (Ezr 1:1) and then “stirred up” “the spirit” of the exiles to return to Jerusalem (Ezr 1:5). But then came the strong and long opposition from “the enemies” (Ezr 4:1). When we do the will of God and His work, we should expect opposition that discourages, intimidates and frustrates us (Ezr 4:4-5). **Disruption (Ezr 4:24)**: The rebuilding of God’s temple “ceased” with only the foundation laid. There seems to be a strange divine silence and inactiveness towards the opposition, in contrast to the beginning and despite the God-honouring acts of His people. The high note of “go up” descends to “knocked down.”

APPLICATION

How will I respond when I am knocked down as I seek to live according to God’s will (2 Cor 4:7-9)?

PRAYER

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

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:
- Pray for pastors and staff:
To remain steadfast in God during setbacks
- Pray for significant people:
- Pray for those in need:
- Pray for self:

WEDNESDAY, 8 FEBRUARY 2017

Reconstruction: Get Up

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 5:1-2; 6:14-15 with Ezra 4:1-5, 24

OBSERVATION

What observations about God and His people can you make from reading verses 1 to 2 and Ezra 6:14-15 in light of Ezra 4:1-5, 24?

Deeper Reflection

Realistic discipleship is a three-steps-forward-two-steps-back growth journey. When we are knocked down, God does not want us to remain there. God tells us, “Get up.” Biblical discipleship is redemptive in nature. **Presence of God:** Some 15 years had passed since the temple rebuilding project had stopped and was left at the foundation stage. We may be in a knocked-down state for a long time, but God’s presence is still with us, whether we feel it or not. During those 15 years, God “was over” Israel (Ezr 5:1). God “was over” His people because He was “the God of Israel”. God’s covenant relationship with us assures us of His faithful covenant presence with us (cf. Isa 41:10). **Word of God:** God spoke through the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to call His people to get up from their knocked-down condition (Ezr 5:1-2). This discipleship-restart commences, continues and completes by the Word of God (Ezr 5:1-2 and 6:14-15). God’s Word gives perspectives and assurances for our encouragement: “We have the prophetic word that is completely reliable, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shinning in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts” (2 Pet 1:19).

APPLICATION

What specific Scripture do I want to apply in the dark moments of my life as “a lamp shinning in a dark place”?

PRAYER

O Lord my gracious Redeemer, when I go astray like a lost sheep, seek Your servant and show me where I have gone wrong.⁹ Restore my soul and keep me on the right paths for Your name’s sake.¹⁰ Lord, establish my footsteps. But when I stumble and fall, do not let me be hurled headlong, for You are the One who holds my hand.¹¹ Amen.

Prayer Pointers

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

⁹ Psalm 119:176

¹⁰ Psalm 23:3

¹¹ Psalm 37:23-24

THURSDAY, 9 FEBRUARY 2017

Reformation: Go Up

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 7:1-28

OBSERVATION

What does Ezra focus on when leading the exiles to return to Jerusalem from Babylon (vv.14-26)?

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Deeper Reflection

There is a 60-year gap between Ezra 6 and 7. Chronologically, Esther stands between Ezra 6 and 7. The Persian kings who reigned in Israel's post-exilic period were: Cyrus and Darius in Ezra 1 to 6 (Ezr 4:5, 24), Ahasuerus in Esther (Esth 1:1; Ezra 4:6) and Artaxerxes in Ezra 7 to 10 and Nehemiah (Neh 7:1; 2:1). Not all the Jews in exile returned to their homeland. Ezra and Nehemiah focus on those who returned, while Esther on those who did not. But God was at work in both groups. Ezra 7 to 10 begins with the second "Go Up" movement: "Ezra went up from Babylon" (v.6), and under his leadership the people, priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers and temple servants "went up to Jerusalem" (v.7). It is progression from reconstruction of the temple (Ezra 1-6) to reformation by the Torah (Ezra 7-10). Under Divine Providence — "the hand of the LORD" (v.28), Ezra the priest and teacher of "the law of Moses" (vv.1-6) was "sent by the king" (v.14) to a **Word-centred** (v.14, vv.25-26) and **worship-centred** mission (vv.15-24). The "go up" from exile is a return to what we live **for** — worship of God, and what we live **by** — the Word of God. It is back to the fundamentals of life.

APPLICATION

How true is it in my life that what I live for is worship of God, and what I live by is the Word of God?

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PRAYER

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

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

FRIDAY, 10 FEBRUARY 2017

Reformation: Gone Off

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 8:35-36; 9:1-2

OBSERVATION

What is the significance of “Now when these things had been completed” (Ezr 9:1) in the context of verses 35 and 36 and Ezra 9:1-2?

Deeper Reflection

Ezra and the exiles reached Jerusalem after a long four-month journey covering some 1,450 kilometres (Ezr 7:8-9). The arrival at Jerusalem climaxed with worship to God: “the exiles who had come from captivity offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel” (v.35). God’s favour was upon the returnees through the Persian government officials who “supported the people and the house of God” (v.36). But soon, the jubilant climax turned into a disastrous anti-climax. Ezra reached Jerusalem in the fifth month (Ezr 7:8-9). But four months later — in the ninth month (Ezr 10:9), Ezra learned that the people of Israel had “not kept themselves separate from the neighbouring peoples with their detestable practices” (Ezr 9:1, NIV) through intermarriage — an act of covenant “unfaithfulness” (Ezr 9:2). Ezra was “utterly shocked” (Ezr 9:3, NLT). He heard about this “when these things had been completed” (Ezr 9:1 – referring to Ezr 8), which signified “a dawning of hope”¹² of restoration to God. Right in the midst of a historic divine reformation movement, we can still easily and quickly go off track to “detestable practices”. So, “be careful, and watch yourselves closely” (Deut 4:9).

APPLICATION

In what areas of my life do I easily stray from God and need to watch carefully over?

PRAYER

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

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for lay leaders:
To guard their hearts diligently and vigilantly

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

¹² Robert Fyall, *The Message of Ezra & Haggai*, The Bible Speaks Today (IVP, 2010), 121

SATURDAY, 11 FEBRUARY 2017

Reformation: Bow Down

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 9:1-5; 10:1-4

OBSERVATION

What observations can you make about Ezra and God in Ezra 9:1-5 and 10:1-4?

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Deeper Reflection

When God is at work in us and we are doing God's will and His work, there will be pressures from the outside (Ezr 4) and problems on the inside (Ezr 9) — at both personal and communal levels. It happened when Nehemiah was rebuilding the broken walls of Jerusalem (Neh 4 – outside pressures; Neh 5 – inside problems), and in the Spirit-filled missional church (Acts 4 – outside pressures; Acts 5 – inside problems). When Ezra heard of Israel's covenant unfaithfulness, his immediate response was to bow down in **humble brokenness**, “praying and making confession, weeping and prostrating himself before the house of God” (Ezr 10:1; 9:3-5). In the whole prayer of Ezra in 9:5-15, there was not a single request made to God. His prayer was just all about **our sinfulness**, “Behold, we are before You in our guilt”, and **God's holiness**, “no one can stand before You because of this” (Ezr 9:15). What else can we say to God? (Ezr 9:10) And it was “while” Ezra was still praying, confessing, weeping and prostrating that God's people repented (Ezr 10:1-4). Certainly, God was moving and working. But here the focus is not about how to move God through prayer. It is about God's **sovereign graciousness** (cf. Exo 33:19).

APPLICATION

What areas in my life do I lack a humble brokenness before God that I ought to pay attention to?

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PRAYER

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

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

SUNDAY, 12 FEBRUARY 2017

SCRIPTURE

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OBSERVATION

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APPLICATION

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PRAYER

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THE PAST WEEK

Review

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

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What gave me life and what drained me?

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How was the Spirit of God at work?

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Reflect

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

Respond

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

WHY DO WE WORSHIP GOD?

God is worthy of all praise and honour.

Scripture: Psalm 99, 100; Romans 12:1

★ ACTIVITY BITE

By searching the Internet or reading books on sign language, learn to sign these words “praise”, “worship”, “sing”, “thanks”, “worthy”, “glory” and “holy”. Read Psalm 99 together as a family. List down all the reasons why the Psalmist wants to give honour and praise to God.

★ CHAT TIME

Q1: How can a person who can't speak praise God?

Q2: According to Romans 12:1, how else can we worship God apart from singing praises to Him?

Q3: Should we worship God more than anything else on earth? Why or why not?

★ LEARNING POINT

God is the creator of all things. He makes all things wonderful for the earth and all the people. In His great love, He created us as His children to have an everlasting relationship with Him. He blesses us with bountiful joy, peace, good health, families, friends and toys too. He wants the very best for us. These are just some the many reasons why we should be grateful to God, and we can express it through our love, worship and praise. We can also worship God through how we live our lives and how we love others. There is no other that can be compared to our great God.

★ ACTION POINT

Name a few things that you are grateful for. For each of them, tell God why you are so thankful for it. End by singing a song of praise to Him.

★ PRAYER POWER

(Ask your children to pray after you.)

God, You are so amazing. All people will praise You for all the wonderful things You have done. I want to worship You in all I say and do. Amen.

MONDAY, 13 FEBRUARY 2017

God Is the Centre

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 1:1-4

OBSERVATION

How do verses 1 to 4 show that God is at the centre of the edict of Cyrus king of Persia?

Deeper Reflection

Verses 1 to 4 record for us the edict of Cyrus king of Persia to his newly built empire, permitting his subjects who were previously deported by the Babylonians to return to their homeland. Cyrus the Great was the most powerful king in the world then. He “created the largest empire the world had yet seen”¹³, stretching “from the Mediterranean Sea and Hellespont in the west to the Indus River in the east”¹⁴. However, verses 1 to 4 have a totally theocentric focus. God is mentioned eight times in all the four verses: “the word of **the LORD**” (v.1), “**the LORD**, the **God** of heaven” (v.2), “his **God**,” “the house of **the LORD**, the **God** of Israel,” “the **God** who is in Jerusalem” (v.3) and “the house of **God**” (v.4). The post-exilic history of Israel began in verses 1 to 4. Thus, the God-centredness of verses 1 to 4 functions as the theological foundation of the post-exilic historical books, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. Israel’s post-exilic days might be inferior to their pre-exilic days (cf. Hag 2:3), but what really matters is that God is the centre of their history — and world history. This can also be true in your own personal life history. Regardless of what you are going through, let God be the centre of your life.

APPLICATION

How has God been the centre of my personal life history?

PRAYER

Lord, let Thine eye be over me in my life journey. Go with me, if life ebbs or if it flows. God ahead, God behind, God be on the path I wind. God above, God below, God be everywhere I go. On ocean deep, keep me, Saviour, keep. As I go over land, give me Thy hand. When troubles come nigh, protect me with Thine eye. From all that I dread, Lord, may I be led.¹⁵ Amen.

Prayer Pointers

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

¹³ Wikipedia

¹⁴ Wikipedia

¹⁵ Adapted from David Adam, *The Edge of Glory: Prayers in the Celtic Tradition* (SPCK, 1985), 32-33

TUESDAY, 14 FEBRUARY 2017

The Word of God

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 1:1; 2 Chronicles 36:17, 20-23

OBSERVATION

What do you observe about the Word of God in verse 1 and 2 Chronicles 36:17, 20-23?

Deeper Reflection

When God raised up the Babylonians against His people for their persistent covenant unfaithfulness that resulted in exile to Babylon (2 Chron 36:17, 20), it was “to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah” (2 Chron 36: 21). After the 70-year exile, when God raised up King Cyrus to allow His people to return to Jerusalem, it was “to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah” (2 Chron 36:22, parallel to v.1). The exact repetition of the same phrase “to fulfill the word of the LORD” in the two different historical eras has a theological intent: to show the primacy and power of the Word of God. Both the negative and positive experiences of Israel demonstrated that “the most important agent at work” in them “is the living word of God”¹⁶. And behind the human words of King Cyrus’ edict were the divine words. The word of God “controls and directs history”¹⁷. Everything stands on the Word of God. To be God-centred is to be Word-centred. To trust in God is to trust in His Word. This means that we stand on the Word of God in everything — even when everything goes wrong and nothing seems to change.

APPLICATION

What does it mean for me to stand on the Word of God in everything, because everything stands on the Word of God?

PRAYER

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

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for pastors and staff:
To grow deeper and stronger in God’s Word

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

¹⁶ Robert Fyall, 31

¹⁷ Robert Fyall, 31

WEDNESDAY, 15 FEBRUARY 2017

The Move of God

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 1:1-4; 1 Chronicles 5:25-26; Jeremiah 20:4-5

OBSERVATION

What do you observe about God's ways in verses 1 to 4, 1 Chronicles 5:25-26 and Jeremiah 20:4-5?

Deeper Reflection

It was God who moved Assyria and Babylonia to carry the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom away into exile respectively (1 Chron 5:25-26; Jer 20:4-5). On one hand, theologically, the exile of God's people was the ultimate covenant curse for covenant unfaithfulness (Lev 26:27-28, 32-33). On the other hand, politically, it was the Assyrian and Babylonian way of preventing rebellion from their captives. Then, the same God "stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia" to reverse the Assyrian and Babylonian way of deporting and displacing their captives, by decreeing that the captives could return to their homeland (vv.1-4). The Persians sought to integrate the "great diversity of peoples into a single administrative system, while maintaining at the same time a tradition of respect for their local customs and beliefs"¹⁸. When God's people in exile heard about the Persian overthrow of the Babylonians, they thought it was "simply the changing of one tyrant to another"¹⁹. No one could have expected Cyrus' policy. They were in for a surprise. No matter how things are going on in the world and in our lives, we must see "the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted" (Isa 6:1).

APPLICATION

What are the challenging circumstances in my life that I need to learn to see God in total sovereign control?

PRAYER

Lord, when the wicked shoot their arrows in darkness at the upright in heart, when the foundations of law and order have collapsed, what can the righteous do? But the Lord is in His holy Temple; the Lord still rules from Heaven. He watches everyone closely, examining every person on earth. I trust in You, O righteous God who loves justice.²⁰ Amen.

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

¹⁸ Derek Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (IVP, 1979, 2009), 20

¹⁹ Robert Fyall, 18

²⁰ Psalm 11:2-4, 7

THURSDAY, 16 FEBRUARY 2017

The God of Heaven

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 1:1-2; 5:11-12

OBSERVATION

How was the divine title “the God of heaven” meaningful and significant to post-exilic Israel (vv.1-2; Ezr 5:11-12)?

Deeper Reflection

In the Old Testament, the divine title “the God of heaven” (v.2) is used most frequently in the post-exilic period. Of its 21 occurrences, 18 are found in the post-exilic writings.²¹ It occurs eight times in Ezra (1:2; 5:12; 6:9, 10; 7:12, 21, 23). The title emphasises “God’s transcendence and His ability to carry out His purposes. He is not confined to one land but is the Creator of heaven and earth”²² (cf. Ezr 5:11). “The God of heaven” is a theological vision that gives assurance and confidence to post-exilic Israel that was still under Gentile dominance, without a king of their own like before. This is also true for us as “aliens and exiles” on earth (1 Pet 2:11), who belong to Him who says, “My kingdom is not of this world” (Jn 18:36). King Cyrus’ acknowledgement of God in his edict (v.2) does not indicate his acceptance of God as his Lord like Rahab (Josh 2:8-13) or Naaman (2 Kin 5:9-15). It “reflects Cyrus’ policy of referring to the gods of other nations the way they themselves did”²³ as “a diplomatic courtesy”²⁴. In reality, it is true that God “**has given** [him] all the kingdoms of the earth and He **has appointed** [him] to build Him a house in Jerusalem” (v.2). For “it is Heaven that rules” (Dan 4:26).

APPLICATION

What does it mean for me to live as aliens and exiles on earth, as one who belongs to the One who says, “My kingdom is not of this world”?

PRAYER

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

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

²¹ 1-2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah and Daniel

²² Robert Fyall, 33

²³ Robert Fyall, 33

²⁴ Derek Kidner, 35

FRIDAY, 17 FEBRUARY 2017

The God of Israel

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 1:3; Exodus 6:6-7

OBSERVATION

What is the significance of “the LORD, the God of Israel” to Israel who returned from exile (v.3 with Exo 6:6-7)?

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Deeper Reflection

The expression “the God of Israel” (v.3) occurs 13 times in Ezra and six times as “the LORD God of Israel.”²⁵ Whenever it is mentioned in the Old Testament, it points to the covenant relationship between God and Israel. Prevailing in the Old Testament is what is called the tripartite covenant formula: “I am your God and you are My people, and I dwell among you.” God delivered and redeemed Israel from bondage in Egypt that “I will take you for My people, and I will be your God” (Exo 6:6-7) and “that I might dwell among them” (Exo 29:45-46). And this continues to be so for us today as the new covenant people of God in Christ (2 Cor 6:16 – citing Lev 26:12). “The house of the LORD, the God of Israel” (v.3) is another way the tripartite covenant formula is expressed. Theologically, “the house of God” (the temple) is the presence of God with His people. That God was still “the God of Israel” spoke volumes to post-exilic Israel. God’s covenant faithfulness! God remained faithful to His covenant with His people despite their unfaithfulness. “If we confess our sins, God is faithful and righteous to forgive our sins” (1 Jn 1:9) because of “the new covenant in My blood” (Lk 22:20).

APPLICATION

What does it mean for me to consciously live out the theological reality of “I am your God, and you are My people”?

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PRAYER

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

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for lay leaders:
To have a strong commitment and confidence in their covenant God

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

²⁵ Ezra 1:3; 3:2; 4:1, 3; 5:1; 6:14, 21, 22; 7:6, 15; 8:35; 9:4, 15

SATURDAY, 18 FEBRUARY 2017

God Is in Jerusalem

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 1:3-4; 2 Chronicles 36:11-19

OBSERVATION

What is the significance of “God who is in Jerusalem” (v.3) in light of 2 Chronicles 36:11-19?

Deeper Reflection

In his edict, King Cyrus wrote “He is the God who is in Jerusalem” (v.3). Never mind that Cyrus said that for political advantage, but his utterance that “God...is in Jerusalem” is theologically incredible. When Solomon committed apostasy, God divided his kingdom into the Northern and Southern Kingdom (1 Kin 11:9-12). God did so “for the sake of David and for the sake of Jerusalem which I have chosen” (1 Kin 11:13). Jerusalem was “the city where I have chosen for Myself to put My name” (1 Kin 11:34-36). The temple, which was “built for Your name” (1 Kin 8:44), was in Jerusalem. But for Israel’s persistent unfaithfulness, the Babylonians — God’s instrument of judgement, “burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem” (2 Chron 36:19). When Cyrus’ edict was announced — before God’s people returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, God was already “in Jerusalem”. And God was “in Jerusalem” when the city was still in its broken-down condition. Perhaps, your life is like the broken-down Jerusalem. But the God of redemption who restores, repairs and rebuilds broken lives is “in Jerusalem”.

APPLICATION

In what ways does the assurance that “God is in the broken-down Jerusalem” give me hope?

PRAYER

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

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

SUNDAY, 19 FEBRUARY 2017

SCRIPTURE

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OBSERVATION

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APPLICATION

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PRAYER

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THE PAST WEEK

Review

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

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What gave me life and what drained me?

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How was the Spirit of God at work?

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Reflect

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

Respond

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

FAMILY DEVOTIONAL • WEEK 3 • FEBRUARY 2017

WHY DO WE OBEY GOD?

We will walk in His ways when we obey God.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 11

★ ACTIVITY BITE

What would you do if there are no laws to stop you from doing anything you want? For example, you can steal money from everyone and spend it on buying all the toys you wanted. Think of three things that you would do and share these thoughts with everyone around you.

★ CHAT TIME

Q1: How would you feel if you were the one who was robbed of all your money?

Q2: Is it necessary for God to set laws to govern His people? Why or why not?

Q3: What are the blessings of obeying God's law?

★ LEARNING POINT

In reality you cannot do whatever you want without having to face some consequences. You cannot walk freely on the road without getting into an accident if you don't obey the traffic rules. Laws are there to protect us, not to restrict our freedom. When God gives His laws to His people, they are meant to bless them and keep them safe. He has given us the Bible where we can learn all His commandments. Sometimes we may not like them because we often like to do what we want, but if we follow His Word closely, we will walk in His blessings.

★ ACTION POINT

Get a piece of paper and write "I will obey God's commandments" in big letters. Use colourful pens and pictures to decorate your piece of paper. Stick it on your bedroom door as a reminder to obey God always.

★ PRAYER POWER

(Ask your children to pray after you.)

Thank You, God, for giving us Your laws to bless and protect us. Please help me obey You every day in everything I do. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

MONDAY, 20 FEBRUARY 2017

God Moves

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 1:1-5

OBSERVATION

What do you learn about God in verses 1 and 5?

Deeper Reflection

“God moved the heart” is the key to Israel’s return from Babylon to Jerusalem: “the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus” (v.1, NIV), and God’s people “whose heart God had moved” (v.5, NIV). **Divine Initiative:** At the human level, Israel cannot leave Babylon for Jerusalem without King Cyrus’ permission. God has to move the heart of the then most powerful king. As for Israel in exile: “At least two generations would have grown up in Babylonia who had no personal experience of their former homeland. People with young families and elderly people would be reluctant to face the rigours of a long journey and return to a broken-down city without amenities and infrastructure”²⁶. God has to move the heart of His people. There must be the divine initiative, or else nothing will happen. “Unless the LORD builds the house” (Psa 127:1): it always has to be “unless the Lord”. **Divine Timing:** “In first year of Cyrus” (v.1) is more than a chronological notice. It is a theological statement of God’s perfect timing. God always moves and acts at the right time. In waiting on God in His apparent “delay”, remember that God is never too late, nor too early (cf. Lk 18:7-8).

APPLICATION

What does the truth of divine initiative and divine timing mean to me in my discipleship journey?

PRAYER

Lord, You have seen my affliction; You have known the troubles of my soul. I trust in You, O Lord, for You are my God, and my times are in Your hand, for into Your hand I commit my spirit. Deliver me from my enemies. Make Your face shine upon Your servant. Save me in Your steadfast love. Strengthen my heart as I wait on You.²⁷ Amen.

Prayer Pointers

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

²⁶ Robert Fyall, 37

²⁷ Psalm 31:5, 7, 14-16, 24

TUESDAY, 21 FEBRUARY 2017

Man Moves

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 1:1-5, 11; Daniel 9:1-3

OBSERVATION

Why didn't God move the heart of every exile to return to Jerusalem to rebuild His temple (vv.5, 11; Dan 9:1-3; 10:1)?

Deeper Reflection

When God moves, man must move in response. For without the response of Israel in exile “the edict of Cyrus would have had little effect”²⁸. **Exiles who returned:** Not all the “survivors” in exile (v.4), the remnant, responded. Only a remnant of the remnant did. It is apparent that God did not move the heart of every exile. But God ensured that the necessary leadership through family heads, priests and Levites was there (v.5). Those with “a real sense of spiritual priority”²⁹ returned. The return was costly. Having “learned to cope and thrive in the environs of Mesopotamia” and “to pull stakes” to travel some 1,450 kilometres “to the impoverished conditions of Palestine”³⁰ was no easy decision. While they had clearly in mind the one mission of rebuilding the temple of God, yet much uncertainty lay ahead. A great step of faith. **Exiles who remained:** Not all in this group were lacking spiritual priority. Daniel remained to continue answering God's call for him (Dan 9:1-3; 10:1). Ezra and Nehemiah were both “born and nurtured in the faith of families still living in Babylon long after Zerubbabel's initial return”³¹. These moved in a different way, at a different time.

APPLICATION

In what way has God moved my heart but I have yet to respond?

PRAYER

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

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for pastors and staff:
To be sensitive to God's leading in life and ministry

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

²⁸ Mark A. Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (John Knox, 1992), 16

²⁹ Robert Fyall, 37

³⁰ Mark Throntveit, 16

³¹ Mark Throntveit, 16

WEDNESDAY, 22 FEBRUARY 2017

New Exodus

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 1:5-11; Isaiah 43:14-21

OBSERVATION

How does the prophecy in Isaiah 43:14-21 present Israel's return from exile as a new exodus?

Deeper Reflection

Isaiah 40 to 66 speaks of grand prophecies with great promises for God's people who "shall be carried to Babylon" (Isa 39:6-7). The prophecy of Israel's return from exile in Isaiah 43:14-21 is given in the Exodus language. God will make "a way through the sea and a path through the waters" (Isa 43:16 – cf. Exo 14:21-22), and "make a roadway in the wilderness, rivers in the desert" (Isa 43:19b – cf. Exo 16:22-27; 17:1-7). It will be "a reversal of the exile"³² and a new exodus: moving "from Babylon to Jerusalem" (v.11) as from Egypt towards the Promised Land. God called His people to leave their past behind: "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past" (Isa 43:18, NIV). Why? Because through the exile Israel's "iniquity has been removed" and "she has received of the LORD's hand double for all her sins" (Isa 40:2). And now, "Behold, I will do something new" (Isa 43:19a). The prophecies in Isaiah 40 to 66 open with "Comfort, O comfort My people" and "speak kindly to Jerusalem" (Isa 40:2). When God's people in exile read the prophecies in Isaiah, it gave them hope. Though we may fail God, our gracious God can give us a new exodus, a new beginning, "to give you a future and a hope" (Jer 29:10-11).

APPLICATION

In what areas of my life do I sense that God wants to give me a new exodus and how should I respond to Him?

PRAYER

You are the covenant God who says, "How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I surrender you, O Israel? My heart is turned over within Me, all My compassions are kindled. I will not execute My fierce anger; I will not destroy Ephraim again."³³ Thus, we can hope in You to give us a new beginning when we fail to be faithful to You. Amen.

Prayer Pointers

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

³² Robert Fyall, 43

³³ Hosea 11:8-9

THURSDAY, 23 FEBRUARY 2017

Used Again

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 1:7-11

OBSERVATION

What is the significance of the writer of the book of Ezra recording details on the temple vessels that were brought up from Babylon to Jerusalem (vv.9-11)?

Deeper Reflection

The hamburger structure of verses 7 to 11 shows that at the heart of the bringing up of the temple vessels from Babylon to Jerusalem is the detailed list of the vessels.³⁴

Vessels carried away **from Jerusalem** (v.7)

Vessels counted out **to Sheshbazzar** (v.8)

Detailed List of Vessels (vv.9-11a)

Vessels brought up **by Sheshbazzar** (v.11b)

With exiles from Babylon **to Jerusalem** (v.11c)

Consecration: As vessels “of the house of the LORD” (v.7), they were therefore holy. They belonged to a holy place, the temple, and to a holy person, God, and were used for the holy purpose of redemption and worship. Likewise, as vessels in God’s house we ought to be cleansed “for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master” (2 Tim 2:20-21, NIV). **Preservation:** The temple vessels “carried away from Jerusalem” in 586 BC (v.7) were still around, and were now carried back “from Babylon to Jerusalem” in 538 BC (v.11c) because Divine Providence had preserved them. The preserved sacred vessels were God’s “silent tokens of His covenant and endless mercy”³⁵. The temple was destroyed, but God would rebuild it and God had preserved these sacred vessels to be used again. God is faithful.

APPLICATION

In what ways is my life a vessel in God’s house cleansed “for special purposes, made holy and useful to the Master”?

PRAYER

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

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

³⁴ Mark Throntveit, 17

³⁵ Robert Fyall, 42

FRIDAY, 24 FEBRUARY 2017

Divine Agenda

SCRIPTURE

Daniel 1:1-2; 5:1-6, 17-29; Ezra 1:1-4, 7-8

OBSERVATION

What can you learn about God in the accounts of the three Gentile kings and the vessels of the house of God (vv.1-2; Dan 5:1-6, 17-29; Ezzr 1:1-4)?

Deeper Reflection

The three accounts of three Gentile kings and the vessels of God's temple show a theology of the divine agenda. **God Gives:** When King Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem in 605 BC, he took "the vessels of the house of God; and he brought them...to the house of his god" (Dan 1:2). Unholy hands carrying holy vessels, from a holy temple into an unholy temple. The act was a declaration by Nebuchadnezzar that his god was superior to the God of Israel. But in reality, behind all these was the dictum "The Lord gave" (Dan 1:2). It was the Lord's will. **God Judges:** At the feast with his nobles, King Belshazzar used God's holy vessels captured by Nebuchadnezzar to drink wine (Dan 5:1-3), and "praised the gods of" gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone (Dan 5:4). God responded with His judgement that ended the Babylonian dominance (Dan 5:17-29). **God Moves:** God moved King Cyrus to bring His holy vessels back to His temple (Ezr 1:1-4, 7-8). God acted in three different ways concerning the same holy vessels that belonged to Him, according to His own agenda. Whether the world is friendly or hostile towards God and His people, it is never outside the agenda of "Heaven that rules" (Dan 4:26).

APPLICATION

How does the theology of the divine agenda shape how I look at the world and how I live in it?

PRAYER

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

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for lay leaders:
To have discernment and alignment with the divine agenda

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

SATURDAY, 25 FEBRUARY 2017

Where's the Ark?

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 1:9-11; Jeremiah 3:14-17

OBSERVATION

Why is there no mention of the ark of the covenant among the vessels brought back to Jerusalem in verses 9 to 11 (with Jer 3:16-7)?

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Deeper Reflection

Absent among the holy vessels that were brought back to Jerusalem was the most important item in the temple: the ark of the covenant. Jeremiah prophesied that when God brings His people back to Jerusalem from exile, there will be no remembrance or mention of the ark (Jer 3:16). The ark will be gone. It “was probably lost or destroyed when Jerusalem fell in 587 BC”³⁶. And the ark “shall not be made again” (Jer 3:16). Placed in the holy of holies, the ark signified the presence and glory of God (Exo 40:34-35). When Ezekiel saw the vision of the glory of God in Babylon, he saw what was, “in effect, a mobile ark of the covenant which can travel wherever the Spirit wills”³⁷ (Eze 1:13-21). The exiles were to learn that “God is not locally confined”³⁸ (cf. Jn 4:21). The mobile ark was “the chariot throne of Yahweh” (Eze 1:26; cf. 1 Chron 28:18) appearing in Babylon “showing His glory in hostile environment”³⁹. The exiles were to see a larger vision and theology of the presence of God. Ezekiel saw that the glory of God was “a figure with the appearance of a man” (Eze 1:26-28). The true ark of the covenant is to take on human form and live among us, and we see His glory (Jn 1:14).

APPLICATION

How does the biblical history of the ark of the covenant help me in understanding the presence and glory of God?

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PRAYER

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

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for leaders:

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

³⁶ Robert Fyall, 43

³⁷ Robert Fyall, 43

³⁸ Robert Fyall, 42-43

³⁹ Robert Fyall, 43

SUNDAY, 26 FEBRUARY 2017

SCRIPTURE

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OBSERVATION

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APPLICATION

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PRAYER

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THE PAST WEEK

Review

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

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What gave me life and what drained me?

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How was the Spirit of God at work?

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Reflect

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

Respond

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

FAMILY DEVOTIONAL • WEEK 4 • FEBRUARY 2017

DOES GOD SEE EVERYTHING I DO?

God is all powerful. He can see everything I do and think.

Scripture: Hebrews 4:13; Psalm 139:1-12

★ ACTIVITY BITE

Get as many small objects as you can find in your home and place them on a table. Cover them using a piece of cloth so that no one can see them. At the count of three, remove the cloth and after five seconds, cover the objects again. Write down the names of the objects you remember seeing and compare your list with others in your family.

★ CHAT TIME

- Q1: Is it easy to see and remember all the objects within such a short period of time? Why or why not?
Q2: God can see everything you do. Are there things that you are afraid to let Him see?
Q3: Why do you think God wants to see everything that you do?

★ LEARNING POINT

God is very powerful and able. He can see everyone and everything they do at the same time. No matter how hard we try to hide from Him, He knows and sees everything. He wants to know everything about us because He loves us. He cares if we are being kind to others because it pleases Him. He cares if we are telling lies or stealing because He wants to teach us do what is right. And because nothing escapes His eyes, He can protect us from danger and He knows all our needs too.

★ ACTION POINT

Since God sees everything, pray and ask Him to show you the things you often do that do not please Him. Ask your parents to teach you how to do what is right based on God's Word.

★ PRAYER POWER

(Ask your children to pray after you.)

God, You are so amazing because You can see everything. I thank You because You always want me to do what is right. Teach me from Your Word. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

MONDAY, 27 FEBRUARY 2017

The Next Generations

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 2:1-20

OBSERVATION

What is the significance of stating “the sons of” in the list of returnees from exile in verses 3 to 20?

Deeper Reflection

There are 20 names in the list of returnees from exile in verses 3 to 20. Each of these 20 individuals was “an important patriarchal figure”⁴⁰. But the people who actually returned were their “sons”. To their ancestors who first went into exile to Babylon in 586 BC they were their next generations. Not the next generation (singular), but the next generations (plural); for “at least two generations would have grown up in Babylonia”⁴¹ by now. It is theologically significant that these were also “descendants” of Abraham (Gen 12:2, 7). The previous generations of these “sons” broke their covenant with God and suffered the divine judgement of exile (2 Kin 25:8-11, 21) and the ultimate covenant curse (Lev 26:27-28, 32-33). But in the fullness of the time – “the first year of Cyrus” (Ezr 1:1), God moved the hearts of these “sons” to pay the high cost of discipleship to uproot from their comfort zone to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple of God (Ezr 1:5). Behind “the sons of” who returned was God’s covenant faithfulness. It is the covenant-keeping God who raises, keeps and moves the next generations – “not for your sake...but for My holy name” (Eze 36:22, 24).

APPLICATION

How does knowing that it is the faithful covenant God who raises, keeps and moves future generations challenge or encourage me in discipling the next generation in today’s complex world?

PRAYER

God Almighty, You can do all things and no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.⁴² What You have planned, who can frustrate it? As for Your stretched-out hand, who can turn it back?⁴³ Lord, You will build Your Church, and thus, Your Church will never die.⁴⁴ As we stand with confidence in this commitment of Yours, help us to be faithful in building Your Church. Amen.

Prayer Pointers

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

⁴⁰ Gary V. Smith, *Ezra-Nehemiah, Esther*, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary (Tyndale, 2010), 32

⁴¹ Robert Fyall, 37

⁴² Job 42:2

⁴³ Isaiah 14:27

⁴⁴ Matthew 16:18

TUESDAY, 28 FEBRUARY 2017

Steadfast in God

SCRIPTURE

Ezra 2:1-20

OBSERVATION

What is the significance of the ancestral names of the returnees from exile in verses 3 to 20, such as “Zaccai” (v.9) which means “Yahweh has remembered”, “Adonikam” (v.13) which means “my Lord has risen” and “Bezai” (v.17) which means “in the shadow of God”?

Deeper Reflection

The ancestral names of the returnees in verses 3 to 20 were given in pre-exilic and exilic times. According to Old Testament scholar, S. Daiches, in his book *The Jews in Babylonia in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah according to Babylonian inscriptions*: “Some of these names do not even occur in the Old Testament. They are, therefore, not mere conventional names, which conveyed little or no meaning to those who gave them and those who bore them. They were coined with full consciousness, and the ideas expressed in them were the ideas that animate the fathers and the children in those times.”⁴⁵ Some of the names in the list are God-centred: “Shephatiah” (v.4) means “Yahweh has judged”; “Zaccai” (v.9) “may be a shortened form of Zechariah (‘Yahweh has remembered’)”; “Bani” (v.10) “is a shortened form of Benaiah (‘Yahweh has built’)”; “Adonikam” (v.13) means “my Lord has risen”; and “Bezai” (v.17) is “a shortened form of Bezalel, means ‘in the shadow of God’”⁴⁶. “Faith” in God while in exile is “implicit”⁴⁷ in these names. These names reflect how the exiles look at their God in their circumstances, and remind and encourage them to remain steadfast in their covenant God.

APPLICATION

How will I centre on God in order to be steadfast in Him during the dark and difficult times of my life?

PRAYER

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

Prayer Pointers

- Give thanks:

- Pray for pastors and staff:
To trust in God’s faithfulness when going through trials

- Pray for significant people:

- Pray for those in need:

- Pray for self:

⁴⁵ Cited by Edwin Yamauchi, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Vol. 4 (Zondervan, 1988), 607

⁴⁶ Edwin Yamauchi, 608-609

⁴⁷ Edwin Yamauchi, 607

NOTES

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NOTES

A page with an orange border and a white background. At the top center, there is a downward-pointing orange triangle. Below it, the word "NOTES" is written in orange, uppercase letters. The page is ruled with horizontal lines: a solid line at the top, followed by a solid line, and then 20 dotted lines for writing.

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