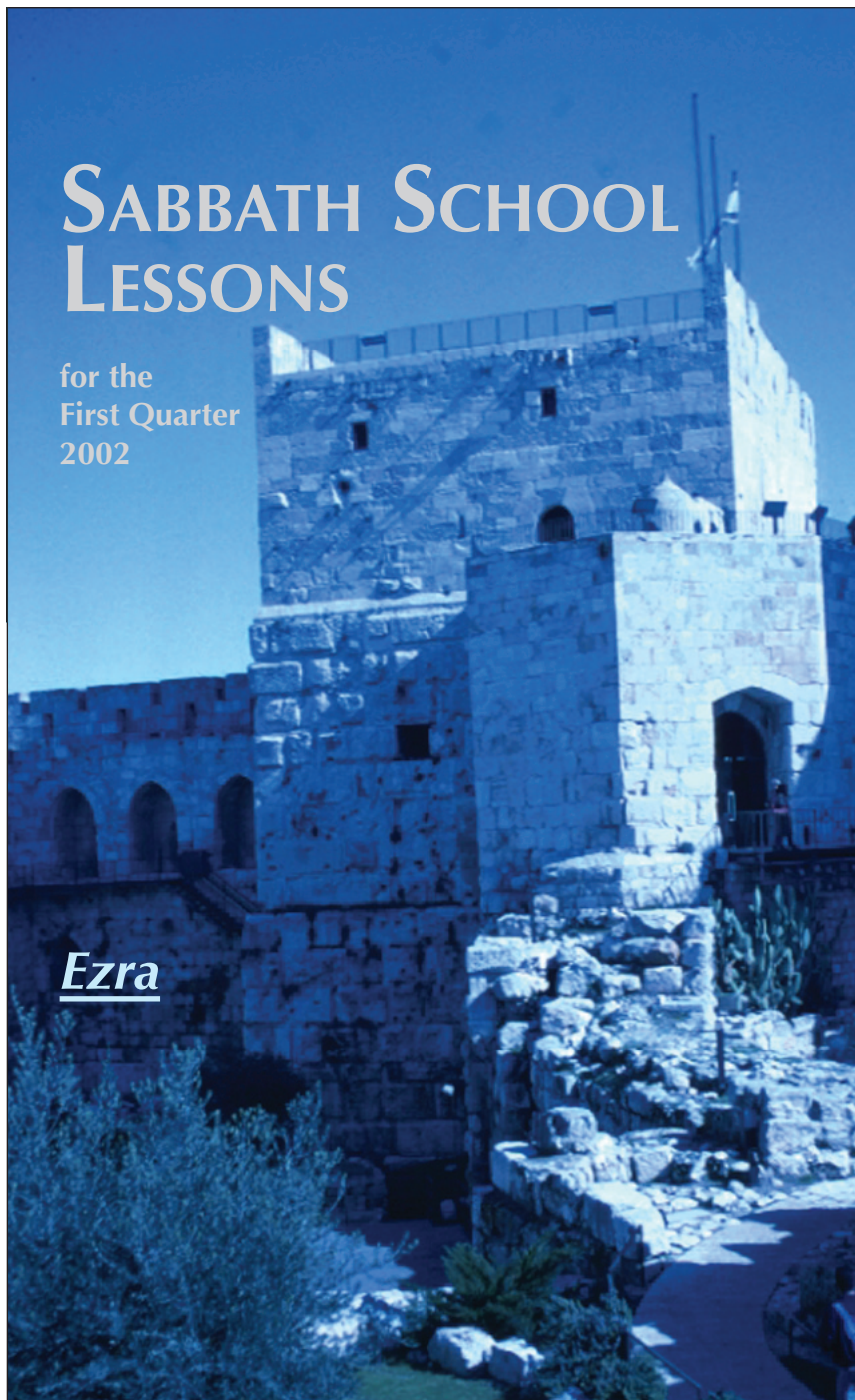


SABBATH SCHOOL LESSONS

for the
First Quarter
2002

Ezra



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Ezra

Issued by the
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Introduction

The records of the period of Jewish history known as the Restoration were written by Ezra and Nehemiah in the books that bear their names, and the authors are themselves the main characters. The time period extended from Cyrus' decree that the Jews should return to their homeland through the end of Ezra and Nehemiah's reforms. Most researchers agree that the books of the Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah are historical; in the Masoretic text, the records of both Ezra and Nehemiah appear as a single book. It was not until 1448 that they were published as separate books with the titles they carry today. The First Quarter of 2002 will focus our attention on the book of Ezra.

Once they were again established in Palestine, the returned exiles experienced personally how God's word is always fulfilled. When the temple was restored, they could look with hope to the future that was expected of them as a nation and God's people. They faced many difficulties in accomplishing their mission; but God taught them that by trusting in Him alone and faithfully observing His Commandments, the foundation of His covenant with Israel, they would recover that which they had lost through the disobedience and rebellion of the past. Ezra the priest played a vital role in the re-education of Judah in matters of faith, as well as in the work of revival and reformation among the people.

The book of Ezra was very probably written in the year B.C. 400. Far more important than the history it contains are its religious lessons for Christians, for it clearly presents the Biblical principle that infidelity to God hinders Him from pouring out His divine blessings, while returning to Him in repentance and confession of sin makes it possible for Him to entrust His blessings to faithful people.

Here is a repetition of the great deuteronomic principle of punishment and reward. In their life of faith, Christians are exiles in this world of sin. They need to wait in confidence for the fulfillment of the messianic promises of restoration to the fatherland while they enter into and maintain a close relationship with Jesus, which is revealed in their faithful, loving observance of His holy law. John 14:15.

To introduce the background of events, a chronology of events preceding the captivity is also provided, including some names of

important people, as well as of rulers and nations that influenced the events.

At the beginning of each lesson are objectives to help focus the study of the lesson and to give the teacher tools for guiding the learning experience. In addition, it has been considered valuable to present personal thought questions at the end. Although some of these may be useful in class discussion, they are generally for personal consideration.

It is our earnest prayer that these lessons will be a great blessing to the church.

THE BROTHERS AND SISTERS
OF THE GENERAL CONFERENCE

“God would have His people in
these days review with a humble
heart and teachable spirit the trials
through which ancient Israel passed,
that they may be instructed in their
preparation for the heavenly Canaan.”

—Patriarchs and Prophets, p. 293.

**Special Sabbath School Offering for the
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May God bless both you and your special gift!

1

Sabbath, January 5, 2002

Captivity: A Result of Unfaithfulness

OBJECTIVES

- To learn that the Lord allows trials in life to develop faith, not just to punish.
- To realize that trials are (1) a natural consequence of evil conduct, or (2) a result of God's carrying out His purposes. In both cases, they purify our character.
- To understand the historical situation in which the Babylonian captivity occurred.
- To discover the reasons why Judah lost its freedom as a people.

A SINFUL NATURE

- 1. What happened to the human heart after the fall? Genesis 6:5.**

“It was possible for Adam, before the fall, to form a righteous character by obedience to God's law. But he failed to do this, and because of his sin our natures are fallen and we cannot make ourselves righteous. Since we are sinful, unholy, we cannot perfectly obey the holy law. We have no righteousness of our own with which to meet the claims of the law of God.”
—*Steps to Christ*, p. 62.

- 2. In the plan of redemption, how are we declared righteous by God? Romans 5:1.**

“But Christ has made a way of escape for us. He lived on earth among trials and temptations such as we have to meet. He lived a sinless life. He died for us, and now He offers to take our sins and give us His righteousness. If you give yourself to Him, and accept Him as your Saviour, then, sinful as your life may have been, for His sake you are accounted righteous. Christ’s character stands in place of your character, and you are accepted before God just as if you had not sinned.” –*Steps to Christ*, p. 62.

3. What means does God employ to make His people holy? Romans 8:18; 1 Peter 1:6.

“Afflictions, crosses, temptations, adversity, and our varied trials are God’s workmen to refine us, sanctify us, and fit us for the heavenly garner.” –*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 115.

“And for those also who mourn in trial and sorrow there is comfort. The bitterness of grief and humiliation is better than the indulgences of sin. Through affliction God reveals to us the plague spots in our characters, that by His grace we may overcome our faults. Unknown chapters in regard to ourselves are opened to us, and the test comes, whether we will accept the reproof and the counsel of God. When brought into trial, we are not to fret and complain. We should not rebel, or worry ourselves out of the hand of Christ. We are to humble the soul before God. The ways of the Lord are obscure to him who desires to see things in a light pleasing to himself. They appear dark and joyless to our human nature. But God’s ways are ways of mercy and the end is salvation.” –*The Desire of Ages*, p. 301.

JUDAH’S DISOBEDIENCE

4. What was the spiritual condition of God’s people at the time of the prophet Jeremiah? Jeremiah 3:2, 6.

“Since the death of good king Josiah, those who ruled the nation had been proving untrue to their trust and had been leading many astray. Jehoahaz, deposed by the interference of the king of Egypt, had been followed by Jehoia-kim, an older son of Josiah. From the beginning of Jehoia-kim’s reign, Jeremiah had little hope of saving his beloved land from destruction and the people from captivity. Yet he was not permitted to remain silent while utter ruin threatened the kingdom. Those who had

remained loyal to God must be encouraged to persevere in rightdoing, and sinners must, if possible, be induced to turn from iniquity.

“The crisis demanded a public and far-reaching effort.”—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 412.

KINGS OF JUDAH IN THE TIME OF JEREMIAH

Jehoahaz (B.C. 609)	He did evil.	2 Kings 23:30.
Jehoiakim (B.C. 609-598)	He did evil.	2 Kings 23:34-36
Jehoiachin (B.C. 598-597)	He did evil.	2 Kings 24:6.
Zedekiah (B.C. 597-586)	He did evil.	2 Kings 24:17.

- 5. What messages did the Lord send to His people through Jeremiah? How did the people react? Jeremiah 3:12-14; 4:14; 6:16.**

“But by the great mass of the people the call to repentance and reformation was unheeded.”—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 412.

- 6. What did he prophesy as a result of Judah’s persistence in open transgression? Jeremiah 25:1, 11.**

CONSEQUENCES OF DISOBEDIENCE

- 7. What was the result of the people’s actions? Jeremiah 18:21.**

“But because of ingratitude and disloyalty they had been scattered among the heathen.”—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 564.

B.C. 605

First deportation of Judah to Babylon (Daniel 1:1-6)

B.C. 597

Second deportation of Judah to Babylon (2 Kings 24:10-17)

B.C. 586

Destruction of Jerusalem and third deportation (2 Kings 25:1-21)

8. Were all the people who were carried to Babylon guilty of rebellion against God? Daniel 1:8; 3:28.

“But among the children of Israel there were Christian patriots, who were as true as steel to principle, and upon these loyal men the Lord looked with great pleasure. These were men who would not be corrupted.... They had to suffer with the guilty, but in the providence of God their captivity at Babylon was the means of bringing them to the front, and their example of untarnished integrity shines with heaven’s luster.”
—*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 1040.

9. Why does a person’s sinful conduct inevitably produce bad results? Proverbs 22:8.

FOR PERSONAL MEDITATION

- Have I ever stopped to consider that the natural consequences of my sinful acts are much weightier than the momentary “satisfactions” they may have given me?
 - What attitude do I take toward God when He calls me to repentance?
 - Are the bad things that happen to me always the result of my transgression?
 - Have I fought against sin with all my strength, trusting in Jesus’ help?
-

Giving a Positive Testimony

OBJECTIVES

- To learn how to receive admonition with humility and be ready to change.
- To understand how important it is to take advantage of the favorable circumstances granted to us by Providence to grow in holiness and not to delay our conversion.
- To arouse from spiritual lethargy and share the gospel of salvation with others, thus obeying the command of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- To be aware of the importance of giving a correct, decisive testimony for the truth.

VALUABLE LESSONS

1. **What did God's people, including Daniel and his friends, experience far from the warmth of their homes and in captivity? Exodus 16:28.**

“The remnant of Judah were to go into captivity, to learn through adversity the lessons they had refused to learn under circumstances more favorable. From this decree of the holy Watcher there could be no appeal.”
—Prophets and Kings, p. 453.

2. **What lesson can we learn from the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of the Jews to Babylon? Galatians 6:7.**

“Let none refuse to be reproved for evil, nor charge the servants of God with being too zealous in endeavoring to cleanse the camp from evil-doing. A sin-hating God calls upon those who claim to keep His law to depart from all iniquity. A neglect to repent and to render willing obedi-

ence will bring upon men and women today as serious consequences as came upon ancient Israel. There is a limit beyond which the judgments of Jehovah can no longer be delayed. The desolation of Jerusalem in the days of Jeremiah is a solemn warning to modern Israel, that the counsels and admonitions given them through chosen instrumentalities cannot be disregarded with impunity." —*Prophets and Kings*, pp. 416, 417.

3. What two attitudes can we adopt when called to face crises and difficulties in life? What should we do? 1 Peter 5:6, 7; Proverbs 29:1.

MAKING GOD KNOWN

4. What did the Lord want to accomplish through the people of Israel at the time of Isaiah? Did God's people fulfill His holy desire? Isaiah 54:2, 3; 5:3-7.

"But it was God's purpose that by the revelation of His character through Israel men should be drawn unto Him. To all the world the gospel invitation was to be given. Through the teaching of the sacrificial service Christ was to be uplifted before the nations, and all who would look unto Him should live. All who, like Rahab the Canaanite, and Ruth the Moabitess, turned from idolatry to the worship of the true God, were to unite themselves with His chosen people. As the numbers of Israel increased they were to enlarge their borders, until their kingdom should embrace the world.

"...But Israel did not fulfill God's purpose....

"The blessings they had received brought no blessing to the world. All their advantages were appropriated for their own glorification. They robbed God of the service He required of them, and they robbed their fellow men of religious guidance and a holy example." —*Christ's Object Lessons*, pp. 290-292.

"Why did the Lord permit Jerusalem to be destroyed by fire the first time? Why did He permit His people to be overcome by their enemies and carried into heathen lands? It was because they had failed to be His missionaries, and had built walls of division between themselves and the people round them. The Lord scattered them, that the knowledge of His truth might be carried to the world. If they were loyal and true and submissive, God would bring them again into their own land." —*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 1040.

5. What additional opportunity was given to God's people in captivity? Isaiah 60:1.

“He will purify His church even as He purified the temple at the beginning and close of His ministry on earth. All that He brings upon the church in test and trial comes that His people may gain deeper piety and more strength to carry the triumphs of the cross to all parts of the world.” —*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, p. 228.

“The Lord in His providence brought His servants, Daniel, Nehemiah, Ezra, face to face with kings and rulers, that these idolaters might have an opportunity to receive the light. Thus the work which God had given His people to do in prosperity, in their own borders, but which had been neglected through their unfaithfulness, was done by them in captivity, under great trial and embarrassment.” —*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 455.

6. What is the mission of Christians in this end time? Matthew 5:14-16.

“God has called His church in this day, as He called ancient Israel, to stand as a light in the earth. By the mighty cleaver of truth, the messages of the first, second, and third angels, He has separated them from the churches and from the world to bring them into a sacred nearness to Himself. He has made them the depositaries of His law and has committed to them the great truths of prophecy for this time. Like the holy oracles committed to ancient Israel, these are a sacred trust to be communicated to the world. The three angels of Revelation 14 represent the people who accept the light of God's messages and go forth as His agents to sound the warning throughout the length and breadth of the earth.” —*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, pp. 455, 456.

THE FULFILLMENT OF THE TIME

7. What had the prophets foretold regarding the captivity of God's people in Babylon? Isaiah 45:1-4, 13; Jeremiah 25:12.

8. What did Daniel do with his opportunities under the reign of Nebuchadnezzar and especially during that of Cyrus, the king of Persia? Daniel 2:28; 4:27.

“The sterling qualities of the man of God as a statesman of farseeing ability led the Persian ruler to show him marked respect and to honor his judgment. And now, just at the time God had said He would cause His temple at Jerusalem to be rebuilt, He moved upon Cyrus as His agent to discern the prophecies concerning himself, with which Daniel was so familiar, and to grant the Jewish people their liberty.” —*Prophets and Kings*, p. 557.

KINGS OF BABYLON (approximate dates)

Nabopolassar	B.C. 625-605
Nebuchadnezzar	B.C. 605-562
Evil-Merodach	B.C. 562-560
Negal-shar-usar	B.C. 560-556
Nabonidus	B.C. 556-539
Belshazzar	B.C. 539

KINGS OF MEDO-PERSIA

Darius (King of Media and Babylon)	B.C. 539-537
Cyrus (King of Persia)	B.C. 559-530
(King of Persia and Babylon)	B.C. 537-530
Cambyzes	B.C. 530-522
Smerdis	B.C. 522
Darius I (Darius Hystaspes)	B.C. 522-486
Xerxes (Ahasuerus)	B.C. 486-465
Artaxerxes Longimanus	B.C. 465-423

RETURN OF THE EXILES

Cyrus' decree (Ezra 1:1-4)	B.C. 537
Darius' decree (Ezra 6:1-12)	B.C. 520
Artaxerxes' decree (Ezra 7:1-26)	B.C. 457

FOR PERSONAL MEDITATION

- Are my bad actions the result of Satan's temptations or the consequence of my lack of consecration to Jesus?
- What lessons have I learned from going through difficult trials of faith?
- How do I react when a brother or a sister corrects me?
- Am I doing everything on my part to take advantage of the time and means God has given me to be a light in the world?

A Decree Full of Hope

OBJECTIVES:

- To understand that the prophecies foretelling the end of the Jewish captivity were important in keeping alive the faith and hope of the earnest worshipers.
- To show that the purpose of prophecy in the plan of redemption, and especially in the time of the end, is to prepare a people for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- To examine the historical setting of King Cyrus' decree to restore Jerusalem as well as the response of the Jews who decided to return.
- To compare the final deliverance of God's faithful children at the time of the end with the deliverance of the Jews from Babylonian captivity.

THE PURPOSE OF PROPHECY

1. **What was the importance of the prophecies given before the Babylonian captivity foretelling Judah's restoration? John 13:19; Psalm 136:23, 24; 137:1-6.**

"The dark years of destruction and death marking the end of the kingdom of Judah would have brought despair to the stoutest heart had it not been for the encouragements in the prophetic utterances of God's messengers. Through Jeremiah in Jerusalem, through Daniel in the court of Babylon, through Ezekiel on the banks of the Chebar, the Lord in mercy made clear His eternal purpose and gave assurance of His willingness to fulfill to His chosen people the promises recorded in the writings of Moses. That which He had said He would do for those who should prove true to Him, He would surely bring to pass....

"Many, like Daniel, had been studying the prophecies, and had been seeking God for His promised intervention in behalf of Zion." —*Prophecies and Kings*, pp. 464, 558, 559.

- 2. What is the purpose of prophecy in the plan of redemption, and what role does the prophetic gift play in the remnant church today? John 13:19; Deuteronomy 29:29; Isaiah 8:20.**

“God has a people upon the earth who in faith and holy hope are tracing down the roll of fast-fulfilling prophecy and are seeking to purify their souls by obeying the truth, that they may not be found without the wedding garment when Christ shall appear....

“The signs foretold in prophecy are fast fulfilling around us. This should arouse every true follower of Christ to zealous action.” —*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, p. 307.

RETURN TO THE EARTHLY FATHERLAND

- 3. What was King Cyrus’ attitude toward the prophecy of Isaiah 45 presenting the mission he was to carry out? Ezra 1:1-4.**
- 4. What was the reaction of the elders of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, as well as of many other exiles, before Cyrus’ decree was given exactly 70 years into the captivity? Ezra 1:5.**
- 5. Did the Jews return to Jerusalem with empty hands? Ezra 1:6-11.**

“The Lord has resources. His hand is on the machinery. When the time came for His temple to be rebuilt, He moved upon Cyrus as His agent to discern the prophecies concerning himself, and to grant the Jewish people their liberty. And more, Cyrus furnished them the necessary facilities for rebuilding the temple of the Lord. This work began under Cyrus, and his successor carried on the work begun.” —*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, p. 1175.

RETURN TO THE HEAVENLY FATHERLAND

6. **God's people are also on the way to their heavenly fatherland. For what gift should we yearn? John 20:22.**

7. **What should be our attitude toward the prophecies proclaiming our imminent redemption and return to the heavenly Father's house? Romans 13:11-14.**

FOR PERSONAL MEDITATION

- Am I really earnest and diligent in studying the prophecies concerning the present time?
 - Am I familiar with the prophecies? What can I do to understand them better and search their spiritual depth?
 - Have I received with an undivided heart the good news that Christ has died to save me?
 - What is my hope for the future?
 - What am I doing so that this hope may grow more intense each day?
-

4

Sabbath, January 26, 2002

Gratitude vs. Discontent

OBJECTIVES

- To meditate on the importance of the typical services in the sanctuary. These services were established by God and pointed to the atoning work of Christ. The primary objective of those returning from the captivity was to restore worship, for the future of Judah depended upon its centering its attention in Jerusalem and the temple and in cutting off every contact with pagan influences.

- To realize that in every decisive revival or reformation circumstances come up which test our faith and that then all complaining and dissatisfaction should be cast out of our hearts, for such attitudes are not of God.
- To inspire in one another the spirit of gratitude toward God, the Fountain of all blessings, and understand that the church is preserved and grows through our cooperation.

THE RESTORATION OF WORSHIP

1. What was the first thing the exiles did under the orders of Joshua* and Zerubbabel once they were established in Jerusalem? Ezra 2:70; 3:1-6.**

“As speedily as possible, an altar was erected on the site of the ancient altar in the temple court. To the exercises connected with the dedication of this altar, the people had ‘gathered themselves together as one man;’ and there they united in re-establishing the sacred services that had been interrupted at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. Before separating to dwell in the homes they were endeavoring to restore, ‘they kept also the Feast of Tabernacles.’” —*Prophets and Kings*, p. 560.

2. Why was it so important to begin the restoration in this way? Exodus 25:8.

“The setting up of the altar of daily burnt offerings greatly cheered the faithful remnant. Heartily they entered into the preparations necessary for the rebuilding of the temple, gathering courage as these preparations advanced from month to month. They had for many years been deprived of the visible tokens of God’s presence. And now, surrounded as they were by many sad reminders of the apostasy of their fathers, they longed for

* Joshua—High priest, descendant of Aaron. Haggai 1:1; Zechariah 3:1.

** Zerubbabel—His name means “descendant from Babylon.” He was the son of Jehoiachin’s oldest son, Shealtiel, and therefore a grandson of King Jehoiachin and descendant of King David. He was a ruler, along with Joshua and others, in the first group that returned to Jerusalem (Ezra 2:2) and was named governor of Judah. Haggai 2:2. He is identified in the Spirit of Prophecy as “Sheshbazzar.” See *Prophets and Kings*, p. 559; Ezra 3:8; 5:14, 16.

some abiding token of divine forgiveness and favor. Above the regaining of personal property and ancient privileges, they valued the approval of God. Wonderfully had He wrought in their behalf, and they felt the assurance of His presence with them; yet they desired greater blessings still. With joyous anticipation they looked forward to the time when, with temple rebuilt, they might behold the shining forth of His glory from within." —*Prophets and Kings*, pp. 560-563.

3. Where does the Lord want to live today? Proverbs 23:26.

EXPRESSION OF DISCONTENT

4. Why did many of the priests and Levites who were present for the ceremony laying the temple foundation cry with loud lamentation? How can we consider their attitude? Ezra 3:12.

"Sadness because of the mistakes of the past should have given way to feelings of great joy. God had moved upon the heart of Cyrus to aid them in rebuilding the temple, and this should have called forth expressions of profound gratitude." —*Prophets and Kings*, p. 564.

5. What mixed emotions burst forth, and what effect did the negative attitude have on the builders? Ezra 3:13.

"The murmuring and complaining, and the unfavorable comparisons made, had a depressing influence on the minds of many and weakened the hands of the builders. The workmen were led to question whether they should proceed with the erection of a building that at the beginning was so freely criticized and was the cause of so much lamentation." —*Prophets and Kings*, p. 564.

EXPRESSION OF GRATITUDE

6. But what did the priests and Levites do as the builders laid the foundations of the temple? Ezra 3:10, 11.

7. What spirit should we cultivate? Psalm 103:1-5.

“Have we not reason to talk of God’s goodness and to tell of His power? When friends are kind to us we esteem it a privilege to thank them for their kindness. How much more should we count it a joy to return thanks to the Friend who has given us every good and perfect gift. Then let us, in every church, cultivate thanksgiving to God. Let us educate our lips to praise God in the family circle.... Let our gifts and offerings declare our gratitude for the favors we daily receive. In everything we should show forth the joy of the Lord.” —*God’s Amazing Grace*, p. 325.

FOR PERSONAL MEDITATION

- Is there an altar in my home, where I present my praise and prayers to the Lord every morning and evening?
 - What is my attitude when others complain, lose courage, or are discontented?
 - What attitude do I regularly reveal?
 - Do I acknowledge the many blessings God has given me?
 - What have I done—and what am I doing—to thank Him for His great benefits to me?
-

The Samaritans' Opposition

OBJECTIVES

- To identify the Samaritans and the work they did against those who had come back to rebuild Jerusalem.
- To understand that alliances with the surrounding nations were forbidden by God, because they enticed the believers to separate from the true worship, and that the same thing is forbidden in principle today.
- To analyze what “unlawful alliances” we may make which are detrimental to our spirituality and the progress of God’s work and to learn how to avoid them.
- To deepen our realization of the importance of faith in developing the work and in forming holy lives.

A REJECTED PROPOSAL

1. **Who were the Samaritans, and what apparently well-intentioned offer did they make to Zerubbabel? Ezra 4:1, 2.**

“Close by the Israelites who had set themselves to the task of rebuilding the temple, dwelt the Samaritans, a mixed race that had sprung up through the intermarriage of heathen colonists from the provinces of Assyria with the remnant of the ten tribes which had been left in Samaria and Galilee. In later years the Samaritans claimed to worship the true God, but in heart and practice they were idolaters. It is true, they held that their idols were but to remind them of the living God, the Ruler of the universe; nevertheless the people were prone to reverence graven images.” —*Prophets and Kings*, p. 567.

2. **What did the Jewish elders answer, and why did they take this position? Ezra 4:3.**

“‘We seek your God, as ye do,’ they declare. ‘Let us build with you.’ But had the Jewish leaders accepted this offer of assistance, they would have opened a door for the entrance of idolatry. They discerned the insincerity of the Samaritans. They realized that help gained through an alliance with these men would be as nothing in comparison with the blessing they might expect to receive by following the plain commands of Jehovah....

“And now, having repented of the evils that had brought upon them and their fathers the judgments foretold so plainly through Moses; having turned with all the heart to God, and renewed their covenant relationship with Him, they had been permitted to return to Judea, that they might restore that which had been destroyed. Should they, at the very beginning of their undertaking, enter into a covenant with idolaters?...

“They refused to enter into alliance with those who, though familiar with the requirements of God’s law, would not yield to its claims.”—*Prophets and Kings*, pp. 568-570.

UNLAWFUL ALLIANCES

3. What instruction had God’s people received regarding making alliances with pagan nations? How are these principles applicable today? Deuteronomy 7:1-4; 14:2; 2 Corinthians 6:14-18.

“The principles set forth in Deuteronomy for the instruction of Israel are to be followed by God’s people to the end of time. True prosperity is dependent on the continuance of our covenant relationship with God. Never can we afford to compromise principle by entering into alliance with those who do not fear Him.

“There is constant danger that professing Christians will come to think that in order to have influence with worldlings, they must to a certain extent conform to the world. But though such a course may appear to afford great advantages, it always ends in spiritual loss. Against every subtle influence that seeks entrance by means of flattering inducements from the enemies of truth, God’s people must strictly guard.”—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 570.

THE WORK IS INTERRUPTED

4. Despite the firm position of God’s people, what work did Satan continue doing through the Samaritans? What did he achieve? Ezra 4:4-6, 23, 24.

“This was a time of wonderful opportunity for the Jews. The highest agencies of heaven were working on the hearts of kings, and it was for the people of God to labor with the utmost activity to carry out the decree of Cyrus. They should have spared no effort to restore the temple and its services, and to re-establish themselves in their Judean homes. But in the day of God’s power many proved unwilling. The opposition of their enemies was strong and determined, and gradually the builders lost heart. Some could not forget the scene at the laying of the cornerstone, when many had given expression to their lack of confidence in the enterprise. And as the Samaritans grew more bold, many of the Jews questioned whether, after all, the time had come to rebuild. The feeling soon became widespread. Many of the workmen, discouraged and disheartened, returned to their homes to take up the ordinary pursuits of life.

“During the reign of Cambyses the work on the temple progressed slowly. And during the reign of the false Smerdis (called Artaxerxes in Ezra 4:7) the Samaritans induced the unscrupulous impostor to issue a decree forbidding the Jews to rebuild their temple and city.” —*Prophecy and Kings*, pp. 572-573.

5. In view of so many difficulties, what conclusion did the builders come to? Ezra 4:4; Haggai 1:2.

“In the hour of their opportunity, the Israelites had not shown themselves willing. Prompt obedience is expected of those whom the Lord chooses and leads. Pleas for delay are a dishonor to God. And yet those who choose to follow their own way, often frame ingenious excuses in self-justification. Thus the Israelites declared that they had begun to rebuild, but that they were broken off in their work because of the hindrances devised by their enemies. These hindrances, they reasoned, were an indication that it was not the proper time to rebuild. They declared that the Lord had interposed difficulties to reprove their hot haste.” —*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, p. 1175.

6. Instead of concentrating on building their own homes, what should they have done? Haggai 1:3, 4.

7. What was absolutely necessary to complete the construction of the temple? 2 Corinthians 5:7.

“Those who talk faith and cultivate faith will have faith; but those who cherish and express doubts will have doubts....

“Faith should be cultivated. If it has become weak, it is like a sickly plant that should be placed in the sunshine and carefully watered and tended.

“When clouds come between your soul and God, when all around you is dark and forbidding, when the enemy stands ready to rob the soul of its integrity to God and the truth, and when error stands out plausible and attractive, then it is time to pray and exercise faith in God.... Cherishing faith, the soul is enabled to rise beyond itself and penetrate the hellish shadow which the enemy casts athwart the pathway of every soul that is striving for an immortal crown.” —*Mind, Character, and Personality*, vol. 2, pp. 534, 535.

“There will be religious failures because men do not have faith. When they look at the things that are seen, impossibilities appear; but God can lead them step by step in the course He desires them to take. His work will advance only as His servants move forward by faith. While they may be called upon to pass through trying times, yet they should ever remember that they are contending with a weakened, beaten foe. God’s people will finally triumph over every power of darkness.” —*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, p. 1175.

FOR PERSONAL MEDITATION

- Do I have an improper alliance with someone or something?
 - What things in my life have caused me to be disappointed?
 - What kind of excuses have I used, or do I still use, for not doing what is right?
 - Am I exercising faith in what God can do for me and through me, or do I prefer to trust what I can do by myself?
-

Consider Your Ways

OBJECTIVES

- To see what caused the builders to lose faith; and God, to withhold His blessings.
- To recognize God as our wisdom and efficiency and to know that He is always a powerful helper for those who trust in Him.
- To review how this experience has been fulfilled in our life.
- To be motivated to cooperate more intensively in the spiritual edification of the church, putting God's interests above our own.

THE PEOPLE ARISE

1. **What happened to God's people when they abandoned their responsibilities to God? Why? Haggai 1:9-11.**

"For over a year the temple was neglected and well-nigh forsaken. The people dwelt in their homes and strove to attain temporal prosperity, but their situation was deplorable. Work as they might they did not prosper. The very elements of nature seemed to conspire against them. Because they had let the temple lie waste, the Lord sent upon their substance a wasting drought. God had bestowed upon them the fruits of field and garden, the corn and the wine and the oil, as a token of His favor; but because they had used these bountiful gifts so selfishly, the blessings were removed.

"Such were the conditions existing during the early part of the reign of Darius Hystaspes. Spiritually as well as temporally, the Israelites were in a pitiable state. So long had they murmured and doubted; so long had they chosen to make personal interests first, while viewing with apathy the Lord's temple in ruins, that many had lost sight of God's purpose in restoring them to Judea; and these were saying, 'The time is not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built.' Haggai 1:2." —*Prophets and Kings*, p. 573.

2. Amid this crisis, what did the prophets Haggai and Zechariah urge the people to do? Haggai 1:7, 8.

“But even this dark hour was not without hope for those whose trust was in God. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah were raised up to meet the crisis. In stirring testimonies these appointed messengers revealed to the people the cause of their troubles. The lack of temporal prosperity was the result of a neglect to put God’s interests first, the prophets declared. Had the Israelites honored God, had they shown Him due respect and courtesy, by making the building of His house their first work, they would have invited His presence and blessing.” —*Prophets and Kings*, pp. 573, 574.

3. What was the reaction of the people and the leaders, and what did the Lord do to encourage them? Ezra 5:1, 2; Haggai 1:13; 2:4, 5.

“The message of counsel and reproof given through Haggai was taken to heart by the leaders and people of Israel. They felt that God was in earnest with them. They dared not disregard the repeated instruction sent them—that their prosperity, both temporal and spiritual, was dependent on faithful obedience to God’s commands. Aroused by the warnings of the prophet, Zerubbabel and Joshua, ‘with all the remnant of the people, obeyed the voice of the Lord their God, and the words of Haggai the prophet.’ Verse 12....

“The Israelites nevertheless moved forward by faith in response to the call of God’s messengers, and labored diligently to restore the ruined temple. It was a work requiring firm reliance upon God.” —*Prophets and Kings*, pp. 575, 577.

4. What was the result of their renewed faith that led them to obedience? Ezra 5:3-5; 6:7-16.

“The officers were answered so wisely that they decided to write a letter to Darius Hystaspes, then the ruler of Medo-Persia, directing his attention to the original decree made by Cyrus, which commanded that the house of God at Jerusalem be rebuilt, and that the expenses for the same be paid from the king’s treasury.

“Darius searched for this decree, and found it; whereupon he directed those who had made the inquiry to allow the rebuilding of the temple to proceed.” —*Prophets and Kings*, pp. 578, 579.

THE CHURCH, THE SPIRITUAL TEMPLE

- 5. To what did the apostle Paul compare the church? Ephesians 2:19-22.**

- 6. What should we do as individuals? Haggai 1:5; Ephesians 5:14-17.**

“A revival of true godliness among us is the greatest and most urgent of all our needs. To seek this should be our first work. There must be earnest effort to obtain the blessing of the Lord, not because God is not willing to bestow His blessing upon us, but because we are unprepared to receive it. Our heavenly Father is more willing to give His Holy Spirit to them that ask Him, than are earthly parents to give good gifts to their children. But it is our work, by confession, humiliation, repentance, and earnest prayer, to fulfill the conditions upon which God has promised to grant us His blessing. A revival need be expected only in answer to prayer.” —*Selected Messages*, vol. 1, p. 121.

OUR HELPING POWER

- 7. What message does the Lord send today to those who are working in His vineyard and who are called to face discouraging circumstances? Psalm 27:14; 126:5, 6; 2 Timothy 2:1.**

“The soldier of Christ must meet many forms of temptation, and resist and overcome them. The fiercer the conflict, the greater the supply of grace to meet the need of the soul.... The true Christian will understand what it means to pass through severe conflicts and trying experiences; but he will steadily increase in the grace of Christ to meet successfully the enemy of his soul.... The darkness will press upon his soul at times; but the true light will shine, the bright beams of the Sun of righteous-

ness will dispel the gloom; and ... through the grace of Christ he will be enabled to be a faithful witness of the things which he has heard from the inspired messenger of God.... By thus communicating truth to others, the worker for Christ obtains a clearer view of the abundant provisions made for all, of the sufficiency of the grace of Christ for every time of conflict, sorrow, and trial. Through the mysterious plan of redemption, grace has been provided, so that the imperfect work of the human agent may be accepted in the name of Jesus our Advocate.” —*God’s Amazing Grace*, p. 260.

“Whatever may be the circumstances of the Christian, however dark and mysterious may be the ways of Providence, however great his deprivation and suffering, he may look away from them all to the unseen and the eternal. He has the blessed assurance that all things are working for his good.” —*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1099.

FOR PERSONAL MEDITATION

- How do I consider my own condition and that of the church?
 - What place do God’s interests hold in my life?
 - Have I thought about this seriously?
 - What am I doing for God’s church?
 - In what or in whom do I put my trust when things are difficult?
-

Studying and Following the Word

OBJECTIVES

- To gain an understanding of Ezra's outstanding characteristics, stressing his attitude of looking for the divine design and practically applying it.
- To locate the starting point for the 2300-day prophecy of Daniel 8:14.
- To understand that only by dedicating ourselves to the Lord—through prayer, study of His Word, and practical experience in living out the Biblical truths and sharing the good news—can we obtain deep joy.

EZRA'S CHARACTER AND LIFE

1. **What was Ezra's profession, and under what king did he serve? Ezra 7:1, 6.**

“About seventy years after the return of the first company of exiles under Zerubbabel and Joshua, Artaxerxes Longimanus came to the throne of Medo-Persia. The name of this king is connected with sacred history by a series of remarkable providences. It was during his reign that Ezra and Nehemiah lived and labored. He is the one who in 457 B.C. issued the third and final decree for the restoration of Jerusalem. His reign saw the return of a company of Jews under Ezra, the completion of the walls of Jerusalem by Nehemiah and his associates, the reorganization of the temple services, and the great religious reformations instituted by Ezra and Nehemiah.” —*Prophets and Kings*, p. 607.

“Ezra was of the sons of Aaron, a priest, whom God chose to be an instrument of good unto Israel, that He might put honor upon the priesthood, the glory of which had been greatly eclipsed during the captivity. Ezra was a man of great piety and holy zeal. He was also a man of learning, and a ready scribe in the law of Moses. These qualifications made him an eminent man.” —*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1134.

2. What was Ezra's great desire, and what did he do to achieve his goal? Ezra 7:10.

"But he was not satisfied with his spiritual condition. He longed to be in full harmony with God; he longed for wisdom to carry out the divine will. And so he 'prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it.' Ezra 7:10."—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 608.

"Ezra was impressed by the Spirit of God to search the historical and poetical books of the Bible, and by this means he became familiar with the sense and understanding of the law. During the captivity the knowledge of God's will had to some extent been lost. Ezra gathered all the copies of the law that he could find. He published copies of these among God's people, and became a teacher of the law and the prophecies in the schools of the prophets. The pure Word, thus diligently taught by Ezra, gave knowledge that was invaluable at that time."—*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1134.

THE STUDY OF PROPHECY

3. How important do you consider the study of sacred history as well as of the prophecies in developing your faith? John 5:39.

"As we near the close of this world's history, the prophecies recorded by Daniel demand our special attention, as they relate to the very time in which we are living. With them should be linked the teachings of the last book of the New Testament Scriptures. Satan has led many to believe that the prophetic portions of the writings of Daniel and of John the revelator cannot be understood. But the promise is plain that special blessing will accompany the study of these prophecies. 'The wise shall understand' (verse 10), was spoken of the visions of Daniel that were to be unsealed in the latter days; and of the revelation that Christ gave to His servant John for the guidance of God's people all through the centuries, the promise is, 'Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein.' Revelation 1:3....

"A careful study of the working out of God's purpose in the history of nations and in the revelation of things to come, will help us to estimate at their true value things seen and things unseen, and to learn what is the true aim of life. Thus, viewing the things of time in the light of eternity, we may, like Daniel and his fellows, live for that which is true and noble

and enduring. And learning in this life the principles of the kingdom of our Lord and Saviour, that blessed kingdom which is to endure for ever and ever, we may be prepared at His coming to enter with Him into its possession.”—*Prophets and Kings*, pp. 547, 548.

4. **Compare the lives and characteristics of Daniel and Ezra, both of whom were captives in Babylon. See Daniel 9:1-3; Ezra 7:10.**

5. **What significant prophecy began at the start of Ezra’s ministry? Daniel 8:14; 9:25; Ezra 7:12-26.**

“This prophetic period, the longest in the Bible, was to extend, according to Daniel’s prophecy, from ‘the going forth of the commandment to restore and build Jerusalem’ to the cleansing of the sanctuary. The command to restore Jerusalem was given in B.C. 457. Seventy weeks (490 years) were to be cut off for the Jews, and at the end of this period, in A.D. 34, the gospel began to be preached to the Gentiles. From the beginning of the period in B.C. 457 to the anointing of the Messiah would be 69 weeks (483 years). Precisely at the prophesied moment, in the autumn of A.D. 27, Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan. He was also anointed with the Holy Spirit and began His public ministry. ‘In the midst of the week’ (3½ years later), the Messiah was crucified. The complete period of 2,300 days extended from B.C. 457 to A.D. 1844, when the investigative judgment began in heaven.”—*El Conflicto de los Siglos (The Great Controversy)*, p. 374.

“The commandment to restore and build Jerusalem, as completed by the decree of Artaxerxes Longimanus, went into effect in the autumn of B.C. 457.”—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 233.

“The decree of the 7th year of Artaxerxes was the first to give the Jewish state full autonomy, subject to the overlordship of the Persian Empire.”—*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, p. 853.

6. **What should we experience, and then what should we do when we see prophecies being fulfilled? Luke 21:28, 31; 1 Thessalonians 5:4-6.**

“Shall we let the example of Ezra teach us the use we should make of our knowledge of the Scriptures? The life of this servant of God should be an inspiration to us to serve the Lord with heart and mind and strength. We each have an appointed work to do, and this can be accomplished only by consecrated effort. We need first to set ourselves to know the requirements of God, and then to practice them. Then we can sow seeds of truth that will bear fruit unto eternal life.” —*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 1134.

“There are many who do not understand the prophecies relating to these days, and they must be enlightened. It is the duty of both watchmen and laymen to give the trumpet a certain sound.” —*Evangelism*, pp. 194, 195.

FOR PERSONAL MEDITATION

- Have I applied my heart, as did Ezra, to the study of the Holy Scriptures and especially of the prophecies related to the time of the end?
 - What spiritual traits have I determined to have in my life?
 - Do I consider the time in which we are living as very important?
 - Am I living in symmetry with the truth I have received?
 - What am I doing to share the knowledge of salvation with others?
-

Looking for Devoted Ministers

OBJECTIVES

- To grasp why the Levites did not heed Ezra's first call to return to Jerusalem to carry out their holy office.
- To consider reasons for the lack of gospel workers and for ministers leaving the gospel service.
- To motivate the church to pray for consecrated individuals to enter the ministry as well as for its ordained ministers and for means to provide a reasonable remuneration for God's servants.
- To fortify the workers with the promise that Christ is always at their side to help them fulfill their ministry.

A CALL TO THE LEVITES

1. **What reaction did the king's decree produce in Ezra and his fellow workers, and what did this decree reveal? Ezra 7:27, 28.**

"This decree brought great rejoicing to those who had been uniting with Ezra in a study of God's purposes concerning His people. 'Blessed be the Lord God of our fathers,' Ezra exclaimed, 'which hath put such a thing as this in the king's heart, to beautify the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem: and hath extended mercy unto me before the king, and his counselors, and before all the king's mighty princes.' Verses 27, 28.

"In the issuing of this decree by Artaxerxes, God's providence was manifest. Some discerned this and gladly took advantage of the privilege of returning under circumstances so favorable. A general place of meeting was named, and at the appointed time those who were desirous of going to Jerusalem assembled for the long journey. 'I gathered them together to the river that runneth to Ahava,' Ezra says, 'and there abode we in tents three days.' Ezra 8:15." —*Prophets and Kings*, p. 612.

ABOUT THE DECREE

- Ezra had to organize the judicial system in accordance with Jewish law. Ezra 7:26.
- He was provided with substantial financial resources. Ezra 7:6, 21, 22.
- The prophecy foretold complete restoration of civil and religious government in Israel, which was provided for in Artaxerxes' final decree. The previous two decrees were preparatory and preliminary to this. Ezra 6:14.

2. How many Levites–priests–responded to Ezra's call? Ezra 8:15.

“Ezra had expected that a large number would return to Jerusalem, but the number who responded to the call was disappointingly small. Many who had acquired houses and lands had no desire to sacrifice these possessions. They loved ease and comfort and were well satisfied to remain. Their example proved a hindrance to others who otherwise might have chosen to cast in their lot with those who were advancing by faith.

“As Ezra looked over the company assembled, he was surprised to find none of the sons of Levi. Where were the members of the tribe that had been set apart for the sacred service of the temple? To the call, Who is on the Lord's side? the Levites should have been the first to respond. During the captivity, and afterward, they had been granted many privileges. They had enjoyed the fullest liberty to minister to the spiritual needs of their brethren in exile. Synagogues had been built, in which the priests conducted the worship of God and instructed the people. The observance of the Sabbath, and the performance of the sacred rites peculiar to the Jewish faith, had been freely allowed.

“But with the passing of the years after the close of the captivity, conditions changed, and many new responsibilities rested upon the leaders in Israel. The temple at Jerusalem had been rebuilt and dedicated, and more priests were needed to carry on its services. There was pressing need of men of God to act as teachers of the people.... In view of these changed conditions, the priests in Babylon should have been quick to discern in the issuance of the decree a special call to them to return to Jerusalem.”—*Prophets and Kings*, pp. 612-614.

3. What new invitation did Ezra direct to the Levites? What was the result? Ezra 8:17-20.

“Once more Ezra appealed to the Levites, sending them an urgent invitation to unite with his company. To emphasize the importance of quick action, he sent with his written plea several of his ‘chief men’ and ‘men of understanding.’ Ezra 7:28; 8:16....

“The appeal was heeded; some who had been halting, made final decision to return. In all, about forty priests and two hundred and twenty Nethinim—men upon whom Ezra could rely as wise ministers and good teachers and helpers—were brought to the camp.” —*Prophets and Kings*, pp. 614, 615.

THE SHORTAGE OF WORKERS

- 4. What does the Lord Jesus tell us regarding workers? Matthew 9:37.**

- 5. What do you see as the most common reasons for the lack of spiritual workers and why individuals leave the ministry?**

- 6. What can the church do to find individuals inspired to enter gospel service? Matthew 9:38.**

“It was as a means ordained of God to educate young men and women for the various departments of missionary labor that colleges were established among us. It is God’s will that they send forth not merely a few, but many laborers. But Satan, determined to overthrow this purpose, has often secured the very ones whom God would qualify for places of usefulness in His work. There are many who would work if urged into service, and who would save their souls by thus working. The church should feel her great responsibility in shutting up the light of truth, and restraining the grace of God within her own narrow limits, when money and influence should be freely employed in bringing competent persons into the missionary field.

“Hundreds of young men should have been preparing to act a part in the work of scattering the seeds of truth beside all waters. We want men who will push the triumphs of the cross; men who will persevere under discouragements and privations; who will have the zeal and resolution

and faith that are indispensable in the missionary field....” –*Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students*, pp. 514, 515.

“All who desire an opportunity for true ministry, and who will give themselves unreservedly to God, will find in the canvassing work opportunities to speak upon many things pertaining to the future, immortal life. The experience thus gained will be of the greatest value to those who are fitting themselves for the ministry....

“We have a work to do. Educate, educate, educate young men to give themselves to the ministry of the word.” – *Colporteur Ministry*, pp. 33, 19.

7. What should those who hear God’s call answer? Whom can they trust fully as their Guide and Support? Isaiah 6:8; John 16:33; Matthew 28:19, 20.

FOR PERSONAL MEDITATION

- What do I really know about the work of the ministry?
 - What do I do to help and encourage the ministry?
 - Am I one of those who criticizes the ministers, or do I cooperate closely with them?
 - What do I generally do when I see a minister make a mistake?
 - What have I done in my church to promote the gospel work?
 - What can my local church do to encourage devotion to gospel ministry?
-

Firm Trust in God

OBJECTIVES

- To develop the security that if the work is of God and our faith is in Him, we do not have to request men's protection or the help of the ungodly to continue making progress.
- To understand that victory can be obtained only by trusting in God.
- To define what it means to "trust in God."
- To grasp that the attitude of fully trusting in God is not a feeling but a life principle, based upon a "Thus saith the Lord."

FAITH TESTED

1. **What test did Ezra face when he was ready to return to Jerusalem, more than seventy years after Zerubbabel? Ezra 8:22.**

"All were now ready to set forth. Before them was a journey that would occupy several months. The men were taking with them their wives and children, and their substance, besides large treasure for the temple and its service. Ezra was aware that enemies lay in wait by the way, ready to plunder and destroy him and his company; yet he had asked from the king no armed force for protection. 'I was ashamed,' he has explained, 'to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way: because we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek Him; but His power and His wrath is against all them that forsake Him.' Verse 22." —*Prophets and Kings*, p. 615.

2. **What decision did Ezra take regarding this matter? Ezra 8:21, 23.**

“In this matter, Ezra and his companions saw an opportunity to magnify the name of God before the heathen. Faith in the power of the living God would be strengthened if the Israelites themselves should now reveal implicit faith in their divine Leader. They therefore determined to put their trust wholly in Him. They would ask for no guard of soldiers. They would give the heathen no occasion to ascribe to the strength of man the glory that belongs to God alone. They could not afford to arouse in the minds of their heathen friends one doubt as to the sincerity of their dependence on God as His people. Strength would be gained, not through wealth, not through the power and influence of idolatrous men, but through the favor of God. Only by keeping the law of the Lord before them, and striving to obey it, would they be protected.

“This knowledge of the conditions under which they would continue to enjoy the prospering hand of God, lent more than ordinary solemnity to the consecration service that was held by Ezra and his company of faithful souls just before their departure. ‘I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava,’ Ezra has declared of this experience, ‘that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of Him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance.’ ‘So we fasted and besought our God for this: and He was entreated of us.’ Verses 21, 23.”—*Prophets and Kings*, pp. 615, 616.

TRUSTING IN GOD

3. What does “trust in God” really mean? Psalm 23:4; 20:7, 8; Isaiah 31:1.

“We have every reason to trust in God, and to bring all our worries and anxieties to Jesus Christ, that we may become better acquainted with Him. It should not be a difficult thing to remember that the Lord Jesus is desirous that we should bring all our troubles and perplexities to Him. ‘Take it to the Lord in prayer,’ and then leave your perplexities and burdens with Him....

“The love of Jesus is something expressed, more tender than even the love of a mother for her child. The most tender love we know is that of a mother for her child, but the love of Jesus exceeds this. She may change in her affection. Mothers may become unkind, but Jesus never, never will become unmindful or unkind, or cruel to His children.

“Then never, never will we show distrust and want of faith....

“Look unto Jesus, who is the Author and Finisher of our faith. Let us not do as we have done, make ourselves miserable over some supposed future tomorrow’s burden. Carry your duties of today cheerfully. Today’s faith, today’s trust in Jesus, we must have. Today I may look and live.

Today I will put my trust in God. Today I will rest in quietude and peace kept by the power of God. Say, 'The Lord will be glorified by my being cheerful and happy in His assurance of His love—today.'" —*The Upward Look*, p. 180.

4. **Whom did Jesus trust in the most distressing moments of His life on earth? Matthew 26:39-44; 27:43.**
5. **How can we know that Jesus' trust was not disappointed? Search for a text that proves this and share it with the class.**
6. **What experience will those who trust fully in God enjoy? Isaiah 50:7-10.**

"Come to Jesus, and receive rest and peace. You may have the blessing even now. Satan suggests that you are helpless, and cannot bless yourself. It is true; you are helpless. But lift up Jesus before him: 'I have a risen Saviour. In Him I trust, and He will never suffer me to be confounded. In His name I triumph. He is my righteousness, and my crown of rejoicing.' Let no one here feel that his case is hopeless; for it is not. You may see that you are sinful and undone; but it is just on this account that you need a Saviour. If you have sins to confess, lose no time. These moments are golden. 'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.' 1 John 1:9. Those who hunger and thirst after righteousness will be filled; for Jesus has promised it. Precious Saviour! His arms are open to receive us, and His great heart of love is waiting to bless us." —*Selected Messages*, vol. 1, pp. 352, 353.

7. **Why can our trust not be based on the shifting sand of feelings? Jeremiah 17:9.**

"He [Ezra] longed to be in full harmony with God; he longed for wisdom to carry out the divine will. And so he 'prepared his heart to seek

the law of the Lord, and to do it.' Ezra 7:10."—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 608.

"Feelings are often deceiving, emotions are no sure safeguard; for they are variable and subject to external circumstances. Many are deluded by relying on sensational impressions. The test is: What are you doing for Christ? What sacrifices are you making? What victories are you gaining? A selfish spirit overcome, a temptation to neglect duty resisted, passion subdued, and willing, cheerful obedience rendered to the will of Christ are far greater evidences that you are a child of God than spasmodic piety and emotional religion."—*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, p. 188.

FOR PERSONAL MEDITATION

- Whom do I trust when I am called to face trials?
 - Have I had the experience of putting myself fully in God's hands? What results have I had?
 - Have I understood that my faith should be based on principles and not on feelings and emotions?
 - What is my faith based on?
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10

Sabbath, March 9, 2002

A Planned Work

OBJECTIVES

- To see that Ezra had a clear objective and mission: To return to Jerusalem and re-establish God's law as the standard of faith and action in Israel.
- To study how he reached his objective and fulfilled his mission and to see that there is planning behind every successful spiritual enterprise.
- To apply this teaching so the importance of planning will never be forgotten in the development of the church's work.

CHOICE OF PROPER INSTRUMENTS

- 1. Besides fasting and praying to the Lord, what did Ezra do before beginning the journey to Jerusalem? Ezra 8:24.**

“The blessing of God, however, did not make unnecessary the exercise of prudence and forethought. As a special precaution in safeguarding the treasure, Ezra ‘separated twelve of the chief of the priests.’” —*Prophets and Kings*, p. 616.

- 2. How did Ezra portray the characters of the men who were appointed to watch over God’s treasures? What sacred responsibility did he entrust to them? Ezra 8:28, 29.**

“These men were solemnly charged to act as vigilant stewards over the treasure entrusted to their care....

“The care exercised by Ezra in providing for the transportation and safety of the Lord’s treasure, teaches a lesson worthy of thoughtful study. Only those whose trustworthiness had been proved were chosen, and they were instructed plainly regarding the responsibility resting on them.” —*Prophets and Kings*, pp. 616, 617.

A PRUDENT ACTION

- 3. What did he do with the treasure entrusted to him? Ezra 8:25-27.**

- 4. What characterized Ezra’s actions?**

“In the appointment of faithful officers to act as treasures of the Lord’s goods, Ezra recognized the necessity and value of order and organization in connection with the work of God.” —*Prophets and Kings*, p. 617.

ORDER AND ORGANIZATION

- 5. Why are organization and order in Christ’s church so important, and what has to be considered when carrying out every church activity? 1 Corinthians 14:40; Luke 14:28, 29.**

“We want to hold the lines evenly, that there shall be no breaking down of the system of organization and order that has been built up by wise, careful labor.” –*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, p. 258.

“Unless the churches are so organized that they can carry out and enforce order, they have nothing to hope for in the future.” –*Last Day Events*, p. 46.

“God is a God of order. Everything connected with heaven is in perfect order; subjection and thorough discipline mark the movements of the angelic host. Success can only attend order and harmonious action. God requires order and system in His work now no less than in the days of Israel. All who are working for Him are to labor intelligently, not in a careless, haphazard manner. He would have His work done with faith and exactness, that He may place the seal of His approval upon it.” –*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 376.

“It is essential to labor with order, following an organized plan and a definite object....

“Well-defined plans should be freely presented to all whom they may concern, and it should be ascertained that they are understood. Then require of all those who are at the head of the various departments to cooperate in the execution of these plans. If this sure and radical method is properly adopted and followed up with interest and good will, it will avoid much work being done without any definite object, much useless friction.

“The work you are engaged in cannot be done except by forces which are the result of well-understood plans.” –*Evangelism*, p. 94.

6. Compare the following characteristics of Ezra with those of Christ’s faithful church.

	Ezra	The church
His objective and mission	Ezra 7:14, 25	Matthew 28:18-20
His preparation and consecration	Ezra 7:10; 8:21, 23	John 5:39; 1 Peter 2:4, 5, 9
His organization and order	Ezra 7:28; 8:25-27	1 Corinthians 14:40
His foresight and prudence	Ezra 8:22, 24	Mark 3:13, 14

FOR PERSONAL MEDITATION

- Do I have a clear objective in my spiritual life? What is it?
- What mission has the Lord Jesus entrusted to me?
- Have I accepted it as my own?
- What plans do I have for fulfilling my objective and carrying out my mission?

Acknowledging God's Care

OBJECTIVES

- To see in the example of Ezra's trip to Jerusalem that the Lord always protects those who trust Him.
- To grasp the supreme importance of prayer in the critical moments of life.
- To meditate upon one's own experience of faith and give God the glory with thanksgiving for His blessings.

A SUCCESSFUL TRIP

1. **What did the company that left Jerusalem experience? Ezra 8:31, 32; Psalm 34:7.**

"About four months were occupied on the journey, the multitude that accompanied Ezra, several thousand in all, including women and children, necessitating slow progress. But all were preserved in safety. Their enemies were restrained from harming them. Their journey was a prosperous one, and on the first day of the fifth month, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes, they reached Jerusalem." —*Prophets and Kings*, p. 617.

2. **What had they done before leaving? Ezra 8:23.**
3. **What was done with the great treasure they were carrying, and how did this experience strengthen the faith of God's people? Ezra 8:33, 34.**

"It was in the providence of God that those who returned with Ezra had had special seasons of seeking the Lord. The experiences through

which they had just passed, on their journey from Babylon, unprotected as they had been by any human power, had taught them rich spiritual lessons. Many had grown strong in faith; and as these mingled with the discouraged and the indifferent in Jerusalem, their influence was a powerful factor in the reform soon afterward instituted.

“On the fourth day after the arrival, the treasures of silver and gold, with the vessels for the service of the sanctuary, were delivered by the treasurers into the hands of the temple officers, in the presence of witnesses, and with the utmost exactitude. Every article was examined ‘by number and by weight.’ Ezra 8:34.”—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 619.

THANKSGIVING

4. What did all the people do? Why is it so important to encourage thanksgiving? Ezra 8:35; Philippians 4:4-7.

“Why not awake the voice of spiritual song in the days of our pilgrimage?... We need to study God’s Word, to meditate and pray. Then we shall have spiritual eyesight to discern the inner courts of the celestial temple. We shall catch the notes of thanksgiving sung by the heavenly choir around the throne. When Zion shall arise and shine, her light will be most penetrating, and songs of praise and thanksgiving will be heard in the assembly of the saints. Little disappointments and difficulties will be lost sight of.”—*Sons and Daughters of God*, p. 198.

5. As Christians, what should we do every time we travel and in every situation? Psalm 37:5; Matthew 21:22.

“When we are burdened, when we are pressed with temptation, when the feelings and desires of the natural heart are contending for the victory, we should offer up fervent, importunate prayer to our heavenly Father in the name of Christ, and this will bring Jesus to our help, so that through His all-powerful and efficacious name we may gain the victory and banish Satan from our side. But we should not flatter ourselves that we are safe while we make but feeble efforts in our own behalf... ‘Strive [agonize] to enter in at the strait gate.’ Luke 13:24.”—*That I May Know Him*, p. 269.

“Consecrate yourself to God in the morning; make this your very first work. Let your prayer be, ‘Take me, O Lord, as wholly Thine. I lay all my plans at Thy feet. Use me today in Thy service. Abide with me, and let

all my work be wrought in Thee.' This is a daily matter. Each morning consecrate yourself to God for that day. Surrender all your plans to Him, to be carried out or given up as His providence shall indicate. Thus day by day you may be giving your life into the hands of God, and thus your life will be molded more and more after the life of Christ." *—Steps to Christ*, p. 70.

6. What can those who seek help honestly from God be sure of? Psalm 121:3, 7, 8.

7. Make a list of ways to show gratitude to our heavenly Father.

FOR PERSONAL MEDITATION

- How have I experienced the fulfillment of Psalm 121 in my life?
 - Do I pray before doing something important? And what about in the little things?
 - How do I express my gratitude to the Lord when things go well?
 - What is my attitude when things do not turn out as I expect?
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Interceding for the People

OBJECTIVES

- To determine from a study of Judah's spiritual condition what keeps God's people from having full communion with Him.
- To inspire the believers to have a spirit of intercession.
- To differentiate between a holy zeal for God's cause, such as Ezra had, and fanaticism, which sometimes arises and threatens the stability, order, and peace of the church.
- To inspire both ministers and laymen with a holy zeal for reaching souls.

APOSTASY REPEATED

1. What spiritual condition existed in Jerusalem when Ezra arrived? Ezra 9:10.

“Among those who had returned to Jerusalem in former years, there were many who had remained true to God as long as they lived; but a considerable number of the children and the children's children lost sight of the sacredness of God's law. Even some of the men entrusted with responsibilities were living in open sin. Their course was largely neutralizing the efforts made by others to advance the cause of God; for so long as flagrant violations of the law were allowed to go unrebuked, the blessing of Heaven could not rest upon the people.” —*Prophets and Kings*, pp. 618, 619.

2. What was the reason for this situation, and who were involved in it? Ezra 9:1, 2.

3. What was Ezra's reaction? Ezra 9:3-5.

"Now when he learned that notwithstanding the lessons of the past, men of prominence had dared transgress the laws given as a safeguard against apostasy, his heart was stirred within him. He thought of God's goodness in again giving His people a foothold in their native land, and he was overwhelmed with righteous indignation and with grief at their ingratitude. 'When I heard this thing,' he says, 'I rent my garment and my mantle, and plucked off the hair of my head and of my beard, and sat down astonished.'..."

"At the time of the evening sacrifice Ezra rose, and, once more rending his garment and his mantle, he fell upon his knees and unburdened his soul in supplication to Heaven. Spreading out his hands unto the Lord, he exclaimed, 'O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to Thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens.'" —*Prophets and Kings*, pp. 620, 621.

IMPORTANT ELEMENTS IN EZRA'S PRAYER

- Identification with the people: "For our iniquities ... our trespass ... since the day of our fathers have we been in a great trespass..." Ezra 9:6, 7.
- Acknowledgment of God's mercy: "...Grace hath been shewed from the Lord our God,... For we were bondmen; yet our God hath not forsaken us in our bondage,..." Ezra 9:8, 9.
- Acknowledgment of the transgression: "...Give not your daughters unto their sons; neither take their daughters unto your sons,..." Ezra 9:12.
- Relationship between Judah's sin and its meager blessings: "And after all that is come upon us for our evil deeds, and for our great trespass,..." Ezra 9:13.
- Trust in God's grace: "...Thou art righteous:... behold, we are before Thee in our trespasses:..." Ezra 9:15.

THE SPIRIT OF INTERCESSION

- 4. What enormous difference is there between the spirit of Christ and His followers and that of the devil and those who do his work? Romans 8:34; Revelation 12:10.**

"In His intercession as our Advocate, Christ needs no man's virtue, no man's intercession. Christ is the only sin bearer, the only sin offering. Prayer and confession are to be offered only to Him who has entered once for all into the holy place. [Christ declared: 'If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.']

"Christ represented His Father to the world, and He represents before God the chosen ones in whom He has restored the moral image of God. They are His heritage.... Men have only one Advocate, one Intercessor, who is able to pardon transgression."—*That I May Know Him*, p. 73.

"Christ's prayer [in John 17] ... is an illustration of the intercession that He is offering for us before the Father."—*The Upward Look*, p. 31.

"Christ alone can make an effectual plea in our behalf. He is able to silence the accuser with arguments founded not upon our merits, but on His own."—*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 472.

"You who have been educating yourselves and others in a spirit of criticism and accusing, remember that you are imitating the example of Satan."—*Selected Messages*, vol. 1, pp. 42, 43.

5. What is the difference between being zealous for God's cause and being fanatical? What characterized Ezra's every action?

"Christ carried out in His life His own divine teachings. His zeal never led Him to become passionate. He manifested consistency without obstinacy, benevolence without weakness, tenderness and sympathy without sentimentalism. He was highly social; yet He possessed a reserved dignity that did not encourage undue familiarity. His temperance never led to bigotry or austerity. He was not conformed to this world; yet He was not indifferent to the wants of the least among men. He was awake to the needs of all."—*Evangelism*, p. 636.

"But if there is anything upon the earth that should inspire men with sanctified zeal, it is the truth as it is in Jesus. It is the grand, great work of redemption. It is Christ, made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption."—*Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, p. 80.

"Ezra's motives were high and holy; in all that he did he was actuated by a deep love for souls. The compassion and tenderness that he revealed toward those who had sinned, either willfully or through ignorance, should be an object lesson to all who seek to bring about reforms. The servants of God are to be as firm as a rock where right principles are involved; and yet, withal, they are to manifest sympathy and forbearance. Like Ezra, they are to teach transgressors the way of life by inculcating principles that are the foundation of all rightdoing."—*Prophets and Kings*, p. 623.

6. What spirit will God's true ministers demonstrate? Joel 2:1, 12-17.

"In every discourse fervent appeals should be made to the people to forsake their sins and turn to Christ. The popular sins and indulgences of our day should be condemned and practical godliness enforced. The minister should be deeply in earnest himself, feeling from the heart the words he utters and unable to repress his feeling of concern for the souls of men and women for whom Christ died. Of the Master it was said: 'The zeal of Thine house hath eaten Me up.' The same earnestness should be felt by His representatives." —*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, p. 396.

"There is too little weeping between the porch and the altar, and crying, 'Spare Thy people, O Lord, and give not Thine heritage to reproach.' There are too many long doctrinal sermons preached, without one spark of spiritual fervor and the love of God,... too little said of the love and compassion of Jesus Christ." —*Evangelism*, p. 641.

"God's servants must feel the burden of souls and weep between the porch and the altar, crying: 'Spare Thy people, O Lord.'" —*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, p. 130.

FOR PERSONAL MEDITATION

- Is there anything in my life that keeps me from having full communion with God?
 - Do I understand what it means to intercede for souls? Do I practice this?
 - Have I ever been or am I fanatical? What can I do to remove fanaticism from my life?
 - Do I understand the concept of "zeal for souls"?
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Sabbath, March 30, 2002

A Work of Reformation

OBJECTIVES

- To recognize the characteristics of the true reformer, as shown in Ezra's actions, who works by love and with great care rebukes the people he loves.
- To prove that God blesses the faithful, sincere efforts of those who work for the spiritual well being of the church and of individual souls.
- To analyze the steps followed in every process of reconciliation with God.

FAITHFUL INSTRUCTION

1. How did Ezra begin the work of reformation? Ezra 10:3, 5; Acts 3:19.

"This was the beginning of a wonderful reformation. With infinite patience and tact, and with a careful consideration for the rights and welfare of every individual concerned, Ezra and his associates strove to lead the penitent of Israel into the right way. Above all else, Ezra was a teacher of the law; and as he gave personal attention to the examination of every case, he sought to impress the people with the holiness of this law and the blessings to be gained through obedience.

"Wherever Ezra labored, there sprang up a revival in the study of the Holy Scriptures. Teachers were appointed to instruct the people; the law of the Lord was exalted and made honorable. The books of the prophets were searched, and the passages foretelling the coming of the Messiah brought hope and comfort to many a sad and weary heart.

"More than two thousand years have passed since Ezra 'prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it' (Ezra 7:10), yet the lapse of time has not lessened the influence of his pious example. Through the centuries the record of his life of consecration has inspired many with the

determination ‘to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it.’” —*Prophets and Kings*, pp. 622, 623.

TURNING BACK TO GOD

2. How did the people respond to Ezra’s efforts to bring about a revival and reformation? Ezra 10:1, 2.

“The sorrow of Ezra and his associates over the evils that had insidiously crept into the very heart of the Lord’s work, wrought repentance. Many of those who had sinned were deeply affected.... In a limited degree they began to realize the heinousness of sin and the horror with which God regards it. They saw the sacredness of the law spoken at Sinai, and many trembled at the thought of their transgressions.” —*Prophets and Kings*, p. 622.

3. What step did they take? Ezra 10:3, 11, 12, 19.

THE STEPS OF CONVERSION

4. What is the first step in restoring communion with God? Revelation 2:4, 5.

“There is need today of such a revival of true heart religion as was experienced by ancient Israel. Repentance is the first step that must be taken by all who would return to God. No one can do this work for another. We must individually humble our souls before God and put away our idols. When we have done all that we can do, the Lord will manifest to us His salvation.” —*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 590.

5. What did the prodigal son do when he came into his father’s presence after returning home? Luke 15:21.

6. What shows that a person has been converted? Ezekiel 14:6.

“The young man turns from the swine herds and the husks, and sets his face toward home. Trembling with weakness and faint from hunger, he presses eagerly on his way. He has no covering to conceal his rags; but his misery has conquered pride, and he hurries on to beg a servant’s place where he was once a child....

“Arise and go to your Father. He will meet you a great way off. If you take even one step toward Him in repentance, He will hasten to enfold you in His arms of infinite love. His ear is open to the cry of the contrite soul. The very first reaching out of the heart after God is known to Him. Never a prayer is offered, however faltering, never a tear is shed, however secret, never a sincere desire after God is cherished, however feeble, but the Spirit of God goes forth to meet it. Even before the prayer is uttered or the yearning of the heart made known, grace from Christ goes forth to meet the grace that is working upon the human soul.” —*Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 202, 203, 206.

7. What does Christ do in the hearts of those who return to Him, looking for His grace? What does the Bible call the process that begins with justification? Romans 5:1; 1 Thessalonians 5:23.

“The righteousness by which we are justified is imputed; the righteousness by which we are sanctified is imparted. The first is our title to heaven, the second is our fitness for heaven.” —*Messages to Young People*, p. 35.

“Sanctification is not the work of a moment, an hour, a day, but of a lifetime. It is not gained by a happy flight of feeling, but is the result of constantly dying to sin, and constantly living for Christ. Wrongs cannot be righted nor reformations wrought in the character by feeble, intermittent efforts. It is only by long, persevering effort, sore discipline, and stern conflict, that we shall overcome.” —*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 560.

8. Place the following actions in logical sequence, and then explain the process and basis for lasting reformation.

- Perseverance (Remaining under grace)
- Conversion (Admitting one's failure)
- Contrition (Acknowledgment of sin)
- Confession (Change of attitude)
- Conviction (Deep sorrow for sin)

FOR PERSONAL MEDITATION

- Do I understand what it means to be a reformer?
 - What is my attitude toward members of the church who do not seem to be doing well? What do I do for them?
 - What are my thoughts concerning people who have done me wrong?
 - Do I forgive easily? Do I want to be forgiven?
 - Have I experienced the process of conversion?
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Missionary Report from Brazil

To be read on Sabbath, March 30, 2002

**The Special Sabbath School Offering
will be gathered on Sabbath, April 6, 2002**

The Brazilian Field cordially greets the brothers and sisters in Christ who are scattered throughout the different countries of this earth with the greeting of the Christians in the first century A.D.: “Maranatha,” meaning, “The Lord is coming.” 1 Corinthians 16:22, last part.

Certainly the development of the events which have happened at the beginning of this third millennium after Christ tell us that the Lord is coming. Jesus’ second coming to this earth is the central point of salvation (Hebrews 9:28); it is the fulfillment of the blessed hope of God’s children. Titus 2:13. Therefore, Jesus’ coming motivates us to be prepared to unite as a people to work together to give the final message to the world that is perishing in sin.

Brazil is a country located in South America covering an area of 8,511,996 square kilometers, with a population of 170 million. It is divided into 25 states. The predominant religion in this country is Catholicism, and there are more than 5,000 different religious denominations. The International Missionary Society of the Seventh-day Adventist Reform Movement is represented in only 8 states. We rely on the cooperation of three pastors, three Bible workers, and one administrative assistant. Two lay ministers cooperate occasionally. We have 300 church members, a good number of Sabbath school members, and others who are interested in our message.

As you know, Brazil is a very large country, and the ministers and workers have to travel thousands of kilometers just within the states where we are represented. In addition, we have a great deal of virgin territory in the 18 states where we are not represented, and from these places we receive calls which we cannot answer because of lack of economic resources. Therefore, let us work together to help the Lord’s work progress and to call many souls into His fold.

Brothers and sisters, our needs are many, including financial resources to open new fields and to finish constructing chapels for worship. There are churches which need a piece of land where they may construct a house of worship; we need to construct classrooms

for children and youth who now meet outdoors. Therefore, we appeal to your generosity. May your offering be a real sacrifice and a sweet savor to the Lord, and may we say with David, "For all things come of Thee, and of Thine own have we given Thee." 1 Chronicles 29:14.

Thus, we thank you in advance for your support; we pray that the Lord will reward you according to His promises, and that His blessings will never fail you.

—The brethren of the Brazilian Field

