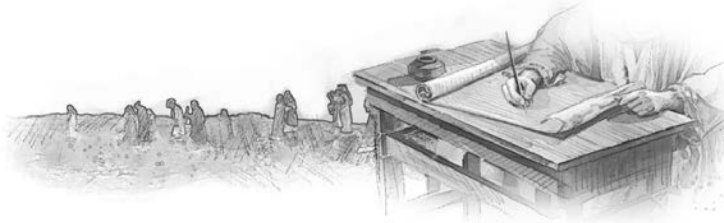


Trials, Tribulations, *and* Lists



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Ezra 1:9–11; Dan. 1:1, 2; Daniel 5; Ezra 8:1–23; Deut. 30:1–6; Neh. 11:1, 2; 12:1–26.*

Memory Text: “These joined with their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse and an oath to walk in God’s Law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, and His ordinances and His statutes” (*Nehemiah 10:29, NKJV*).

We usually skip genealogies and long lists of items in the Bible. But the Lord has them included there for a reason. The biblical Lord is the God of details. He notices the particulars, and this assures us that we are never forgotten by Him.

These few examples of genealogies proclaim that God knows all about our families, and the lists of things tell us that God cares even for what others might deem “insignificant.” Jesus stated that God takes care of sparrows and even counts our hairs: “Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet, not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows” (*Luke 12:6, 7, NIV*). The God who cares about these details cares about us as well, and He knows even the details of all the things that trouble us.

Thus, we can have full confidence, cultivate trust, and rest in assurance that the Lord cares about every area of our lives. While that’s comforting, as it should be, it also should tell us that we need to care about every area, as well.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 30.

The God of History

Read Ezra 1:9–11 and Daniel 1:1, 2. How do the texts in Daniel help us understand what Ezra was referring to?

Notice how in Ezra details are given, while in Daniel the big picture was presented. Together, though, these texts show that the Lord is in control.

“The history of nations speaks to us today. To every nation and to every individual God has assigned a place in His great plan. Today men and nations are being tested by the plummet in the hand of Him who makes no mistake. All are by their own choice deciding their destiny, and God is overruling all for the accomplishment of His purposes.”
—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 536.

Read Daniel 5. What do these texts teach us about the judgment upon Belshazzar?

Babylon fell in October 539 B.C., when Cyrus, king of the Medo-Persian Empire, conquered it. Belshazzar, falsely relying on his successes, luxury, and fame, was so arrogant that he had organized a wild banquet on the night that would end up with his being killed. The divine hand wrote on the palace wall that his days were counted and coming to an end. Even though he knew the fate and conversion story of the mighty King Nebuchadnezzar, he did not learn his lesson. It is always tragic when we do not listen to God’s warnings and do not follow His instruction.

The prophet Daniel was always there, but he had been ignored. When we lose the sense of God’s holiness and His presence in life, we tread a path accompanied with complications, problems, and tragedies, which ultimately ends in death.

After recounting to the king the story of Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel said, “But you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, although you knew all this” (Dan. 5:22, NKJV). How can we make sure that we, in our own context, don’t make the same kind of mistake that Belshazzar did? How should the reality of the Cross always keep us humble before God?

In Their Cities

Scan over the lists in Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7. What do you notice about them?

The repetition of Ezra 2 (the list of those who returned from the Babylonian captivity with Zerubbabel and Joshua) in Nehemiah 7 is deliberate. Again, these lists might seem boring to us, but they reveal an important point, which is that God cares about details that we might not care about.

The walls of Jerusalem were now finished, and the biblical text intentionally wants to demonstrate that the Ezra-Nehemiah generation of returnees were all contributing toward this great accomplishment, even though God alone gave them this success. The present generation built on the accomplishments of the previous one, even though the task was complicated, filled with barriers, and not completed as soon as they would have liked.

The leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah was valued, but the people also did their work. Each group engaged in different tasks performed at different times, but the result is impressive. The beginning (*Ezra 2*) is linked with the end (*Nehemiah 7*), and not only was the second temple built, but also Jerusalem was remodeled and well established.

Read Nehemiah 7:73. What does it teach us about how successful they were in their desire to do God's will?

"The children of Israel were in their cities."

In many ways, the whole return and rebuilding was amazing. A people who many years before had their city devastated, their temple destroyed, and their land ravaged had now returned to that same land and that same city and were rebuilding everything, even the temple. It must have seemed miraculous to them and to those around them, as well. It was all, however, according to the will and the promises of God.

What in your life right now might seem hopeless, but nevertheless, you are still trusting in the Lord to get you through?

Where Are the Priests?

No question—as we saw yesterday, it was an amazing fulfillment of prophecy that brought the Jews back from Babylon.

But as with anything that involves humans, problems existed. And one of the big problems was that, despite all the wonderful promises of restoration after the exile, many of the Jews did not want to return to the land of their ancestors. That is, they preferred to stay in Babylon.

Why would that be?

Read Ezra 8:1–15. Focus specifically on verse 15. What was the big concern here, and why would it be a concern for someone who wanted to reestablish the nation of Israel in its former homeland?

The fact is, not all the Jews in Babylon, including some Levites, wanted to return. Several factors could have been involved. Many of them had been born and brought up in the new land, and that was all they knew. Many might not have wanted to make the long and unquestionably dangerous trip back to a land that they had never known to begin with. Eventually, though, we know that they brought along enough Levites to minister in the temple (see Thursday’s study), despite the challenges.

“By now, the Jews who remained in the land of exile had been there for almost a century and a half. Excavations of Nippur have brought to light numerous documents that show that many wealthy Jews lived in that region of Mesopotamia during the reign of Artaxerxes I. Hence, it may have been a difficult task for Ezra and his fellow leaders to convince as many to return as did accompany him. These returning colonists could expect only a hard pioneering life in the old homeland, with far fewer comforts than in Babylonia. In view of these considerations it is surprising to find that Ezra succeeded in persuading almost 2,000 families to cast in their lot with their brethren in the old homeland.”
—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, p. 376.

“We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God”
(*Acts 14:22, NKJV*). What does this tell us about the reality of trials and hardships for those who want to serve the Lord faithfully?

Humbled Before God

Read Deuteronomy 30:1–6. What promise was given here to the Hebrew people? What must this promise, among others like it, mean to men such as Ezra and Nehemiah?

Ezra and Nehemiah knew the prophecies. They knew that God was going to bring the people back from captivity. We saw in Nehemiah 9 that they understood their history and the reasons for their troubles. At the same time, too, they knew God’s graciousness and leading, despite their sins.

Thus, they trusted in the Lord, that He would make the return from captivity successful. Those promises, however, didn’t mean that they would not face many challenges along the way. In much of this quarter so far, we have looked at the trials and tribulations that they faced, even amid the promises of God.

Read Ezra 8:16–23. What was the challenge here, and how did they respond to it?

Despite the promises, Ezra knew just how dangerous the journey was. Thus, the fasting and the humbling before God were ways of acknowledging just how dependent they were upon the Lord for their success. At this time, with so many dangers ahead of them, the idea of asking the king for help and protection had at least occurred to Ezra. But in the end, he chose not to do that, in contrast to Nehemiah (*Neh. 2:9*), who did have an escort to protect him. Ezra obviously felt that if he had asked, it would have brought dishonor to the Lord, for he had already said to the king, “The hand of our God is upon all those for good who seek Him, but His power and His wrath are against all those who forsake Him” (*Ezra 8:22, NKJV*). In this case, it worked out well for them, for he later wrote (*Ezra 8:31*) that the Lord had protected them, and they made it to their destination safely.

Of course, we are to trust in God for everything. At the same time, too, what are times we do call upon even those not of our faith for help? In many cases, why is that not wrong—but perhaps even appropriate?

In the Holy City

Read Nehemiah 11:1, 2. What is going on in this passage? Why would they have to cast lots to see who would have to live in Jerusalem as opposed to living in the other cities?

What does Nehemiah 11 teach us? It was necessary to get new residents for Jerusalem from the newcomers who had come back to the land after their exile.

Apparently it was easier to live in the countryside than in the city. People had their own land, inherited from their forefathers. To abandon it and go to live in Jerusalem was a sacrifice, and many could rightly feel that they would be uprooted if they did so. Life would have new challenges, and an urban lifestyle is different from living in a rural area. Moving to a new, unknown setting is always difficult.

How challenging is it to move to a new city or country where the gospel needs to be spread? Mission to the cities requires willingness to undertake new adventures and hardships.

“Our workers are not reaching out as they should. Our leading men are not awake to the work that must be accomplished. When I think of the cities in which so little has been done, in which there are so many thousands to be warned of the soon coming of the Saviour, I feel an intensity of desire to see men and women going forth to the work in the power of the Spirit, filled with Christ’s love for perishing souls.”
—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 7, p. 40.

Why is the long list of priests and Levites mentioned in Nehemiah 12:1–26? What is the connection between them and the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem described in the second part of the same chapter (*Neh. 12:27–47*)?

God wants things to be done in a proper way. Dedicated and consecrated people are needed first before great things can be accomplished. These priestly families helped Nehemiah build the walls in order that they could safely worship the living God in the temple without intervention from outside. Walls were important for security, but without devoted priests, true worship would be in jeopardy. Hence, all the people, in their various functions, had their roles to play.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Test of Discipleship,” pp. 57–65, in *Steps to Christ*.

“There are those who have known the pardoning love of Christ and who really desire to be children of God, yet they realize that their character is imperfect, their life faulty, and they are ready to doubt whether their hearts have been renewed by the Holy Spirit. To such I would say, Do not draw back in despair. We shall often have to bow down and weep at the feet of Jesus because of our shortcomings and mistakes, but we are not to be discouraged. Even if we are overcome by the enemy, we are not cast off, not forsaken and rejected of God. No; Christ is at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. . . . He desires to restore you to Himself, to see His own purity and holiness reflected in you. And if you will but yield yourself to Him, He that hath begun a good work in you will carry it forward to the day of Jesus Christ. Pray more fervently; believe more fully. As we come to distrust our own power, let us trust the power of our Redeemer, and we shall praise Him who is the health of our countenance.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 64.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Think about Daniel 2 and how Daniel, thousands of years ago, so accurately predicted the rise and fall of empires, even depicting (very accurately) the disunity of modern Europe today. How can we learn to draw comfort from this prophecy, which so powerfully shows us, even amid the chaos of the world, that God knows all that is happening and has even predicted it?
- 2 God knows all about us. This is comforting and gives us security and the assurance that we are in His care. “But now, this is what the LORD says—he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel: ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine’ ” (*Isa. 43:1, NIV*). How can you assure others of God’s presence and care when they go through emotional, relational, social, or financial crises?
- 3 Dwell more on the issue, in Wednesday’s study, of Ezra’s not wanting to call on the king for help because he was afraid that it would make his words about God’s protection seem hollow. We know, for example, that God is a healer. Does this mean, then, that we are showing a lack of faith in Him to heal us if we go to a medical doctor? Discuss this issue in class.

Teaching Russian Orphans

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

The challenge appeared enormous. Natalya Balan, the 59-year-old grandmother, wasn't sure how to make God real to the two young brothers that she had brought home from a Russian orphanage.

The boys—Daniil (age 10) and his brother, Nikita (age 9)—had suffered unspeakable abuse from their alcoholic father and later in the orphanage. Their mother was dead.

Natalya and her husband, Yakov, a retired Seventh-day Adventist pastor, took the foster children into their home in Obolensk, a small town of 4,600 people located 70 miles (115 kilometers) south of Moscow, after reading church cofounder Ellen White's appeal for every Adventist family to care for orphans. The parents prayed earnestly for God to manifest Himself in the boys' lives.

Then calamity struck. Daniil and Nikita owned a pair of old bicycles, a gift from kind neighbors, that they loved to ride. But the boys disliked taking the bicycles up the elevator to the seventh floor of their apartment building. They ignored Father's warning not to leave them on the first-floor landing, and one day the bicycles were gone. How the boys cried!

"Let's pray, and God will help," Mother said. At morning worship, Mother prayed, "Dear God, please help the boys who stole the bikes to return them." Then the boys prayed.

The town had only one school, and Mother was sure that schoolboys had taken the bicycles. With permission from the principal, she hung signs around the school with the following message: "Children from this school stole two bikes belonging to two foster children. Please return the bikes."

Mother and the two boys prayed every morning and evening for three days.

Then the intercom rang, signaling that someone downstairs wished to speak with the family. A male voice said, "Come down and take the bike."

Downstairs, Mother found a stranger with an expensive, brand-new bicycle. "I saw your sign when I took my son to the first grade," he said. "My boy is too small for this bike, so I have decided to give it to you."

The big bicycle went to the older boy, Daniil. "God, thank You for such a nice bike!" he prayed that evening.



Nikita also was happy, but he wished for his own bicycle. Mother told him, "Let's pray to God." The family prayed for a bicycle for Nikita for several days.

One morning, the intercom rang again, and a male voice said, "Come down and take the bike."

Mother found another stranger with another expensive bicycle. The man also said the bicycle was too big for his first-grade son. Nikita was overjoyed! "I thank God that He answers prayers—especially my own that my children would know God," Natalya said.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Nehemiah 10:29*

Study Focus: *Ezra 2, Ezra 8, Nehemiah 7, Nehemiah 10, Nehemiah 12*

Lesson 9 analyzes several lists and genealogies that are found in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The lists include genealogies of those who returned to Judah with Zerubbabel (*Ezra 2*) and then with Ezra (*Ezra 8*) and Nehemiah (*Nehemiah 7*), as well as the enumeration of the vessels and articles that were brought back by Sheshbazzar (Zerubbabel) for the temple of the Lord (*Ezra 1:7–11*) after being carried off to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar. In *Nehemiah 12* is a list of priests and Levites who are enumerated in order that the true worship of God can continue. The attention to all such detail demonstrates God’s care for even the little things in our lives. Moreover, each of the lists teaches us a lesson. The listing of the vessels from the temple brings us back to the banquet of Belshazzar, who purposefully offends God by using these sacred items for his feast (*Daniel 5*). On the other hand, Cyrus honors God and His people by sending the articles back with the people to Jerusalem. The genealogical listings remind the reader that God does not forget His people, that He preserves their families, and that each family has a role in God’s work. Unfortunately, the numbering of the people also demonstrates that not very many of the Israelites ended up returning to Israel. The majority became comfortable in their new homes and culture and did not want to make the trip back to the Promised Land. Those who went back displayed courage and trust in God’s guidance despite the uncertain conditions of rebuilding the land.

Part II: Commentary

Genealogies

Ezra 2 and *Nehemiah 7* list the same group of returnees. It is a repeat of all of the people who eventually returned to Israel from the three groups that came over with Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah. The ultimate number of the whole company returning to Israel is 42,360 (*Ezra 2:64, Neh. 7:66*). This figure is confusing, however, because it is considerably higher than the sum of the figures given in the two chapters:

Exile Lists	Ezra 2	Nehemiah 7
Men of Israel	24,144	25,406
Priests	4,289	4,289
Levites, Singers, Gatekeepers	341	360
Temple Servants (Descendants of Solomon's Servants)	392	392
Men of Unproven Origin	652	642
Totals	29,818	31,089

In both Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7, the final figures are the same (42,360) but counted a little bit differently. How can we explain these discrepancies? There are a few possibilities. It may be that the total number includes priests of unknown origin (*Ezra 2:61–63*), and some additional groups also are probably not mentioned. However, the overall message is crystal clear: God knows those who are His, and no one will be forgotten (*2 Tim. 2:19*).

Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 list various categories of people who came back, along with identifying the names of families, their heads, and representatives. What specific categories of people are listed? Priests, Levites, singers, the Nethinim (temple servants), gatekeepers, sons of Solomon's servants, as well as some who could not prove that they were Israelites but were accepted among the people, just not part of the priesthood (*Ezra 2:59–63*). The different categories especially demonstrate the different roles that the Jews held in working for God. We are each given different gifts and sometimes assignments based on the strengths, gifts, and talents God has given us. He has created each one of us different so that together we make one complete body of believers. The singers were just as important as the priests as they led the people in worship. The temple servants had the important job of keeping the temple clean and organized. They also assisted the Levites with their duties.

List of Animals

Interestingly, animals also are counted in this list of people who returned from Babylonian exile, specifically 736 horses, 245 mules, 435 camels, and 6,720 donkeys (*Ezra 2:66, 67*). Some could interpret this enumeration as powerful evidence that God also cares for animals. Throughout the Bible, God shows His concern for all life. God saved animals in Noah's ark (*Gen. 7:2, 3, 8*) and refused to destroy Nineveh because not only humans repented but also many animals lived there (*see Jon. 4:11*). Moreover, God gave humans at Creation a solemn delegated responsibility to represent Him and care for His created world (*Gen. 1:28*). The same was repeated after the Flood, although

with complications (*Gen. 9:2*) because now the “fear of humans” was placed in animals.

List of Priests

In Ezra 8, Ezra the scribe records the genealogy of those who went with him from Babylon. Only about five to six thousand people came back with Ezra. Ezra’s main concern is for the priestly lineage, given that he was a priest but also because priests were important for the proper function of the temple services. Therefore, he begins the record by tracing the descendants of Phinehas (son of Eleazar) and Ithamar, who came from Aaron, the high priest. Next, he traces the political line of King David through Hattush, and then ordinary citizens fill the rest of the account. Exactly 12 clans are mentioned, reminding the reader of the 12 tribes of Israel. Although the 12 tribes did not return in total, the small number of the Jews who did is just as important as if the 12 tribes were still intact. One of the lessons of this genealogy is that just as God never abandoned the 12 tribes of Israel, so He will watch over the returnees.

After Ezra gathers the people at the river Ahava to travel to Jerusalem, he is saddened because the Levites didn’t come. Those who were to teach the people about God and had the greatest role in restoring the people to “walking with God” did not make the decision to return to the land of Israel. So, Ezra acts. He calls nine leaders and a couple men who are described as “men of understanding” (*Ezra 8:16*) and gives them the task of going to a man named “Iddo” in Casiphia and requesting that he send them Levites, as well as some Nethinims. Not much is known about Iddo or the place of Casiphia, except that it must have been a densely populated site by the Jews. Ezra then praises God because Iddo sent 38 Levites and 220 Nethinims, who were appointed to serve the Levites and help in the temple. The priestly group responded to the Holy Spirit’s prompting and decided to join the assembly at the Ahava River.

Nehemiah 12 records the names of the priests and Levites from the time of the first return from Babylon to the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. Once again, the chronicling of the names demonstrates the significance of the priestly families. The account of the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem comes right after the listing of the priests and Levites, because before the story is told, it must be established that the nation is fully equipped with the personnel needed for the dedication, as well as committed to godliness.

List of Gold and Silver Articles

Before they left for Jerusalem, Ezra proclaimed a fast and a time of prayer.

He did not want to ask for an escort from the king; he spent time on his knees instead. He knew that they needed protection for the journey and needed God to deliver them from looters and raiding parties. Before departing for Jerusalem, Ezra divided the articles and offering for the temple among 12 leaders among the priests. The list of these items is recorded in Ezra 8:24–30. The silver and gold items were a freewill offering to God. As they receive the items, Ezra tells them, “You are holy to the LORD; the articles are holy also” (*Ezra 8:28, NKJV*). The concept of holiness was a crucial one throughout the book of Ezra as the returnees are to dedicate their lives to God and be His representatives on the earth. Ezra and the leaders wanted to reverse the wrong that their forefathers had committed. They were on a mission for God and were going to do it with full commitment to Him.

List of Animals for a Burnt Offering

Another list appears at the end of this account as the exiles arrive in Jerusalem. The list consists of animals offered to God as a burnt offering after arriving safely at their new home (*Ezra 8:35*). The people offer 12 bulls, 96 rams, 77 lambs, and 12 male goats. The incredible number of animals sacrificed as burnt offerings demonstrates the thankfulness of the returnees. They were grateful for God’s protection as they realized that it was not by chance that they had arrived at Jerusalem safely. They also were looking forward to the future. Because God had taken care of them on the journey there, He had a plan for Israel to prosper.

Part III: Life Application

1. Take each of the lists that are mentioned above and think through other possible lessons that we may learn from each of them.
 - a. Answer the following questions as you think about it:
 - (1) Why did the scribe think it was important to record the list?

- (2) Why did God preserve these records?

(3) What does each list mean for you today?

(4) What other characteristics of God can you see through the lists other than that He cares for us and details?

2. Holiness was an important concept of the priesthood as well as of the nation of Israel. On the whole, that is why it was vital to keep records of all the priests and Levites. Throughout the Old Testament, God calls all His people to be holy because He is holy (*Lev. 19:2*). To be holy because God is holy means that we care about moral uprightness.

a. Is holiness and holy living still important today? If yes, why?

b. Does a morally upright person stand out in today's world?

c. Given that we do not have the Old Testament temple and the priesthood, what can we do to make sure that we, as Adventist Christians, fully live for God and live holy lives?
