

Leaders *in* Israel



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Kings 12:1–16; Acts 15:7–11; John 11:46–53; Neh. 4:7–23; Ezra 8:21–23, 31, 32.*

Memory Text: “And all the people went their way to eat and drink, to send portions and rejoice greatly, because they understood the words that were declared to them” (*Nehemiah 8:12, NKJV*).

Both Ezra and Nehemiah are examples of great leaders who were dedicated to God and to fulfilling the tasks that the Lord had called them to do. Their love for God inspired in them a desire to be faithful servants. In fact, their faithfulness has been a central part of our study.

This week we will look at examples of leadership found in the Bible, including the examples of Ezra and Nehemiah. These are not exhaustive lessons, for sure, as there are many more that could be discussed. However, the lessons that were chosen are essential for any leader. You may not consider yourself a leader at this specific time in your life, but we all have influence with some people; therefore, the lessons are applicable to everyone.

Central to the story of these leaders is the Word of God. The Word transformed their thinking and life and resulted in the whole program for revival and reformation. They were totally indebted to God's Word and His instruction that they found in it. In the same way, no matter who we are, and whatever our role is, we must keep the Word of God central to how we live as Seventh-day Adventist Christians.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 28.

The Influence of Leaders

All through the Bible, we can find examples of leadership, both good and bad, and sometimes even a mixture of both. Bad leaders, at times, have done some good things, while good leaders, at times, have done some bad things. After all, all leaders are human beings and, as such, are capable of both good and evil, of doing right and wrong. Who hasn't experienced this reality in their own lives?

The problem, however, is that when you are a leader, you exert great influence, either for good or bad. It's bad enough to be a negative influence in your own home or workplace or wherever your presence is felt. But when you are in a leadership position, be it spiritual, political, or both, the influence is greatly multiplied. How crucial then that in whatever your role, but especially as a leader, you reflect the principles and teachings of Scripture.

Look up the following texts. What kind of examples of leadership do we find there? If good, explain why it was good. If bad, explain why it was bad.

Rehoboam (*1 Kings 12:1–16*) _____

Peter (*Acts 15:7–11*) _____

Josiah (*2 Kings 23:1–10*) _____

Deborah (*Judg. 4:1–16*) _____

Ahab (*1 Kings 21:1–16*) _____

Though just a smattering, what lessons can we take away from these stories about what makes good and bad leadership, and how can we apply what we learn to ourselves in whatever roles we are in?

Evil in the Sight of the Lord

Look at the following texts. What do they tell us about these leaders and their influence over the people they ruled?

1 King 15:26, 34 _____

2 Kings 13:1–3 _____

John 11:46–53 _____

It is a sobering thought to many of us who hold positions of leadership in any capacity that our leadership has the potential to bring people down or up spiritually. And, in all the cases here, the effect was devastatingly negative.

More specifically, our character and dedication to Christ make a difference to those with whom we interact. Spiritual leaders influence others, either toward God if they themselves seek God, or toward evil if they do not.

In contrast to what we have seen today, the fact that Ezra and Nehemiah had a strong relationship with God is undeniable. The amount of fasting and praying that is recorded in these books about Ezra and Nehemiah exceeds what the Bible reports for other great leaders. The nation was walking with God under their leadership, even if everything wasn't perfect. Their direction in life was toward God. On the other hand, the fact that there were those who were not impacted or changed by the influences of Ezra and Nehemiah testifies that no one else's faith but our own ultimately makes the difference for us. After all, look at the people who had the chance to see Jesus in the flesh, to hear Him preach, and even to witness or hear about His miracles, and yet who in the end rejected Him. Yes, we have a role to play, whatever our position in life is, and we can be an influence for good or evil. But in the end, each person will have to answer for himself or herself before God.

Think about the people in your own sphere of influence. What are ways you could improve your influence?

Courage and Empowerment

Read Nehemiah 4:7–23. In what ways did Nehemiah show courage? What gave him this courage?

Nehemiah stood up against their enemies, who tried to intimidate the Jews. Nehemiah responded by taking the initiative to get the people ready to fight. Nehemiah did not just say “All right, God, You do it all.” Instead, he had the people do their part. They picked up swords and other weapons while at the same time working to build the wall. The Jews, under the leadership of Nehemiah, did not cower in fear, but rather boldly picked up arms to defend themselves. Nehemiah encouraged the people, believed in them, worked with them, and gave them the responsibility to act. He empowered them to do the work as he delegated and assigned responsibilities. However, Nehemiah didn’t just tell the people what to do and then go to hide in his room. He stood alongside them and did the hard work that needed to be done.

There are times in the Bible when God told people to stand still and watch Him fight, and then there are many other instances when God said, “Prepare to act, and I will give you victory.” We must do our part if we want to see God’s deliverance and blessings.

“In Nehemiah’s firm devotion to the work of God, and his equally firm reliance on God, lay the reason of the failure of his enemies to draw him into their power. The soul that is indolent falls an easy prey to temptation; but in the life that has a noble aim, an absorbing purpose, evil finds little foothold. The faith of him who is constantly advancing does not weaken; for above, beneath, beyond, he recognizes Infinite Love, working out all things to accomplish His good purpose. God’s true servants work with a determination that will not fail because the throne of grace is their constant dependence.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 660.

In the end, Nehemiah drew his courage from his understanding of the reality and power of God. And yet, as we have seen, his knowledge of God caused him to act in accordance with his faith.

Though the context is different, how does what we have seen in Nehemiah reflect this text: “But someone will say, ‘You have faith, and I have works.’ Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works” (James 2:18, NKJV)?

Purpose and Passion

What do the following texts teach us about the driving force in the lives of both Ezra and Nehemiah? *Neh. 2:1–10, Ezra 7:8–10.*

In all that they did, Ezra and Nehemiah were seeking to see God's will done in the lives of His people. Yes, the people had messed up; yes, they were punished for it. But God, faithful to His promises of restoration, opened the way for His people to return to the Promised Land and, if faithful, to fulfill the goals that He had set for them. And the Lord, in His wisdom, chose two very dedicated men, men somewhat in the likeness of Moses, to play a central role in this restoration, just as He had used Moses generations earlier for a special task, as well.

Great leaders like these two men have a goal. They have a purpose for living that drives their every action. It could be said that both Ezra and Nehemiah had a purpose in life. They had a vision of where they wanted the people of God to be, and then they put everything into accomplishing the goal.

Ezra did this through studying the Scriptures and teaching the people the Word. Nehemiah encouraged the people to do what was right and to stand up boldly for God. Both men wanted to see a restored Jerusalem, but not just a material restoration. They also wanted to see a revival and reformation in the spiritual lives of its inhabitants. That is why they corrected, reproved, and sometimes demanded a certain course of action. Great leaders believe in something greater than the ordinary and the mediocre. Ezra and Nehemiah believed in a loving, powerful God, a God who could do miracles—and they wanted everyone to have a deep connection with Him.

Beginning with the first chapter of Nehemiah, the reader is impressed by Nehemiah's dedication to God's cause and also his distress over the plight of his people. In chapter 1, he weeps when he is told of the hardships of the Israelites in Judah. He gets on his knees and pledges to do whatever God calls him to do. Nehemiah appears to be driven by the idea of making a difference in the world. He was a man of action, action for God. It was not by making the highest salary or having the preeminent position that Nehemiah chose to make a difference (although he had both in Persia), but by going to Judah, to a not-so-prosperous nation, with opposition at every step. He stepped out in faith, regardless of the obstacles before him.

Humility and Perseverance

Read Ezra 8:21–23, 31, 32. Would you consider Ezra’s decision not to speak to the king as foolish or brave? How did Ezra and the people show humility?

Sometime later, Nehemiah accepted the king’s entourage for protection. But in Ezra’s instance, he believed that God could show Himself best if they did not ask anything of the king. Thus, when they reached Judah without harm, it was attributed to their God. Perhaps in certain situations, we may rely too much on other people and not enough on letting God show Himself. Ezra chose to let God do the work in this situation and proved to the king that indeed God was a powerful God.

However, Ezra didn’t act with presumption. He called the people together, and they fasted and prayed over the situation. They didn’t engage in their journey until they had spent serious time with God. They came before God humbly, requesting that His protection become a sign of His power, and God answered.

Read Nehemiah 5:14–19. How did Nehemiah display humility?

True leaders must be willing to humble themselves and be servants. Competent leaders do not require or need a “title” to gain honor. Nehemiah had his doors open and generously gave to the people. He demonstrated his faith in God, and his incredible dedication to God was an example to the people. He had a strong personality and a no-nonsense temperament, but he didn’t put himself above anyone else as superior. He had the highest position in the Jewish nation at that time, and yet he was unstinting. In this way, he reflected the life and teachings of Jesus, who taught us that the best way to lead is to serve others. Jesus did it, and thus we, regardless of our position, are to do the same.

“And He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all’ ” (Mark 9:35, NKJV). What do Jesus’ words here teach us about what it means to be a true leader in God’s sight?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Privilege of Prayer,” pp. 93–104, in *Steps to Christ*.

“The work of restoration and reform carried on by the returned exiles, under the leadership of Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, presents a picture of a work of spiritual restoration that is to be wrought in the closing days of this earth’s history. The remnant of Israel were a feeble people, exposed to the ravages of their enemies; but through them God purposed to preserve in the earth a knowledge of Himself and of His law. They were the guardians of the true worship, the keepers of the holy oracles. Varied were the experiences that came to them as they rebuilt the temple and the wall of Jerusalem; strong was the opposition that they had to meet. Heavy were the burdens borne by the leaders in this work; but these men moved forward in unwavering confidence, in humility of spirit, and in firm reliance upon God, believing that He would cause His truth to triumph. Like King Hezekiah, Nehemiah ‘clave to the Lord, and departed not from following Him, but kept His commandments. . . . And the Lord was with him.’ 2 Kings 18:6, 7.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 677.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Why must we do all that we can before God to be supportive of our leaders?
- 2 Why is the servant-leadership style so difficult, demanding, and at the same time rewarding? Why is it so important for a Christian leader to be a servant, as well?
- 3 In the beginning and at the end of the book, as well as in between, Nehemiah was praying. Both Ezra and Nehemiah were men of prayer. Count carefully how many times the word “prayer” or “prayed” is mentioned in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. These leaders were constantly praying. What should that say to us about our own prayer lives?
- 4 “For he held fast to the LORD; he did not depart from following Him, but kept His commandments, which the LORD had commanded Moses” (2 Kings 18:6, NKJV). How does one “hold fast to the LORD”? What does that mean? How does holding fast to the Lord relate to keeping His commandments?

Seeing the Big Picture

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, AdventistMission.org

A family of five came nearly every day to the Seventh-day Adventist compound in South Sudan's capital, Juba, to ask for food.

Peter Fenoy, a missionary physician running the small Munuki Seventh-day Adventist Clinic on the compound, found the family's actions puzzling.

One day, Peter decided to look for answers, and he went to the family's nearby home. What he saw shocked him. The father, mother, two daughters, and son were taking turns eating. The father and son would eat one day, and the mother and daughters would eat the next day.

Peter, a native of Argentina, returned to the compound and shared his discovery with his wife, Natasha, who was born in South Ossetia, part of the former Soviet Union. "We are focusing only on what we are doing—medical work—and forgetting the people around us who need something else," he told her. "Medical work is a good thing, but the community needs something else: clean water, food, mosquito nets, and containers for carrying water."

After praying, Peter decided to write a US\$150,000 proposal to the Adventist Development and Relief Agency's (ADRA) world headquarters in the United States. He had never written a project proposal before, but ADRA embraced it and covered its budget. In a short time, the Munuki Seventh-day Adventist Clinic became known as the ADRA Juba Project. It was 2005, months before a peace agreement ended a festering armed conflict.

The small clinic expanded its services to offer food and nonfood items, water sanitation, and emergency assistance. In a single year, the project's funding skyrocketed from \$150,000 to \$2 million. "I was surprised," Peter said. "I realized that focusing on people and looking to meet their needs can develop projects that help others."

Peter's life changed drastically. ADRA sent him to Andrews University in the U.S. state of Michigan to earn a master's degree in international development. Then he worked for a number of aid agencies, including ADRA, the Danish Refugee Council, World Vision, and UNICEF, in Jordan, Lebanon, Bolivia, South Ossetia, and Russia's republic of Chechnya.

But everything started with one small thing—a desire to understand why a family was asking for food every day. "My whole life focused on health



before that. I didn't realize that there was something beyond the consulting room," Peter, 39, said in an interview at River Plate Adventist University, his alma mater that sends missionaries like him around the world.

"Don't just focus on what you have and what you are supposed to do," said Peter, left. "Seek to understand what people really need—and then you can offer a better and more Christlike response."

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Nehemiah 8:8, 12*

Study Focus: *Ezra 7, Ezra 8, Nehemiah 1–3, Nehemiah 4:7–23, Nehemiah 5:14–19*

Ezra and Nehemiah demonstrate what it means to be a leader for God. God placed them in positions of influence (Ezra as a priest and Nehemiah as a governor), but it was up to them to be responsible in performing their tasks. Both took their jobs seriously, because they were aware of God’s calling, were committed to Him, and loved God’s people. They realized that they had influence over the people whom they encountered. They used their positions for good. Above all, they demonstrated a passion for God that was palpable. Those who were around them knew that they loved God and that they lived for Him with incredible dedication. That loyalty inspired the Israelite nation to walk with God in a closer relationship.

Ezra and Nehemiah demonstrated courage. They were not afraid to do something that others shrank from doing, such as take a group of exiles back to Jerusalem where they knew life would be tough. They also encouraged and empowered the people, delegating responsibilities to them instead of simply doing everything themselves. They were leaders with a purpose, having a vision for the people of Israel to be restored and revived once again. Therefore, they were willing to do all that was necessary to make this dream happen. The two leaders also displayed humility. They were willing to serve the people and not just be served. Nor did they expect, or desire, to receive lots of money for their work. Their lives and leadership give us principles for servant leadership today. Most important, it is the habits that they developed and practiced that we can learn from and apply in our work for God.

Part II: Commentary

The keys to being a successful leader are the habits that he or she develops. If a leader cultivates a lifestyle of honesty, transparency, openness, and perseverance by spending time in the Word of God, widely reading and growing through education, he or she will have a much greater spiritual influence on people and the world than someone who, in contrast, spends time in “empty” activities (e.g., killing time by idle chatter, watching television for hours each day, or playing

video games). The way we think, and what we focus on, determines our behavior. The habits we develop and practice define how much or how little influence we have on others and how much God can use us and do things through us.

Both Ezra and Nehemiah developed habits from which we can learn. If we want to be leaders who have an impact in the world, we would do well to learn from them and even model our habits after theirs. The good principles of life they cultivated are worthy to be imitated. It is the daily routine that makes a difference, not the big things we do once in a while. So, what was the daily routine of Ezra and Nehemiah? What can we tell about their daily habits from the stories recorded about them?

Ezra: The Spiritual Leader

Although Ezra demonstrated many leadership qualities, perhaps what distinguished him the most are two habits: (1) rigorous Scripture study and (2) earnest prayer and fasting. Ezra seems to have developed these habits when he was young and then never strayed from them. He is described as a “skilled scribe in the Law of Moses” (*Ezra 7:6, NKJV*). The word for “skilled” is *mahir* and represents someone who is prolific at his job. He received the best education in the land. The term *mahir* is very specific and therefore most likely points to Ezra serving as a representative of the Jewish religion to the Persian government. He was a skilled scribe of the law of Moses, which refers to the teachings of the Hebrew Torah (five books of Moses) and God’s teaching, in general, not just the Ten Commandments, as we usually think of when we hear the term “the law.”

However, Ezra was not a scribe educated just in biblical instruction. Rather, he also was changed by his knowledge of the law. Knowledge of the true living God transformed his life. We know that it was the case with Ezra because *Ezra 7:10* says: “For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel” (*NKJV*). The statement that “Ezra had prepared” (*kun*: to establish, firmly set, fix) his heart is crucial. The heart refers to the mind, thoughts, and emotions. Therefore, his “whole being” was firmly set and dedicated to the law of God. The law of God is synonymous with God, whose character it represents. Ezra, therefore, had firmly resolved himself to study the Word of God and be open to its transforming power. He thus dedicated himself to following it wholeheartedly and then teaching it to others. Ezra understood that his specific call in life was to study and teach God’s Word—His instruction. Ezra’s habits included applying to his personal life the deep understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures he gained. Whatever he read, he practiced.

The second habit, praying and fasting, also is clearly visible through the

accounts of Ezra's leadership. As the people gathered at the river Ahava (*Ezra 8:15*) before leaving on their journey to Jerusalem, Ezra called for a fast of the whole assembly. He knew that they needed protection on the journey because they could be attacked by marauders at any point. He also fasted and prayed when dealing with the mixed-marriages situation in the nation (*Ezra 9, Ezra 10*). Thus, it is apparent that he followed a practice that had become his habit whenever encountering a difficult situation. Rather than turning to human advisors only and devising a plan, he first turned to the God of the universe, who ultimately has everything in His hands.

Nehemiah: The Servant Leader

One of Nehemiah's habits was prayer and fasting, as well. When he heard that the people were prevented from continuing the work of rebuilding the city wall because of opposition from their enemies, he sat down, wept, and mourned for days while fasting and praying. He was entreating God to have mercy on His people and to intervene. God answered his prayers and sent him to Jerusalem as a leader of the people (*Nehemiah 1, Nehemiah 2*).

In his acts as governor, we see other habits that Nehemiah displayed. He had a habit of perseverance. He didn't get discouraged by opposition or even the discouragement of the Israelites. He kept focused on what the next course of action should be, including crying out to God for help, and then going back to work. He armed the Israelites so they could protect themselves and act as a deterrent to any outside forces (*Nehemiah 4*). He could have given up because of the severe threats to his life, but his perseverance stemmed from another habit—trusting God. Even trusting in God is a habit that we need to practice. If we make a habit of doubt and mistrusting God, then we may go even further and blame God when the next challenges or problems occur in our life. On the other hand, when we practice trust and faith in God's promises, we will do it even when tough times come our way.

Another habit that Nehemiah demonstrated was generosity. In *Nehemiah 5:14–19*, Nehemiah provided for his servants and also for others who did not have many resources and needed a place to eat every day. Instead of collecting wages as a governor in Israel, Nehemiah gave his earnings to the people. It was a habit that he practiced for years. He became indignant when he learned that the leaders of Israel and the rich were taking from those who had become indebted to them (*Neh. 5:1–13*). Naturally prone to generosity, any injustice to the contrary triggered a quick response in his compassionate heart.

Last, it was not just Ezra who spent time in the Word of God. The governor himself also was an example in that regard (*Neh. 8:9*). In order for Nehemiah to maintain his passion for God and the vision he had for the people, he had to cultivate the habit of spending time studying the Scriptures (*Nehemiah 8*). Dedication to God must be cultivated and nurtured. Seeking God without wavering is a propensity that flourishes only through daily time with God. It is a direct result of prayer and reading the Bible. We need to directly hear from God through His Word. Nehemiah made sure that the people could hear the Scriptures in their language and that it was explained to them. He took charge in collaborating with Ezra, together with Levites, in order to teach the people. A good leader will recognize the gifts of his people. He will then put them to work in their strengths. Nehemiah had the gift of motivating others. He used this gift to inspire his people to unite and work hard, in spite of challenges. Above all, he inspired them to walk with God.

Part III: Life Application

Study of the Scriptures

- 1. What is your habit of studying and reading the Scriptures? In the spirit of learning from one another, share with your class what you do.**

- 2. Brainstorm what your church can do to encourage church members to study the Bible.**

Prayer and Fasting

- 1. Set aside a day for fasting and prayer concerning an issue about which your church needs to pray. Then come together and spend time in prayer over it. Share the experience of prayer and fasting with someone.**

Generosity

1. **Think of ways that your church can be generous to someone in your community.**

2. **What can you do to develop unselfish giving in your own life?**

Perseverance

1. **Share with class members those situations in which you have been tempted to give up your work for God or the community. What can you do to encourage others to keep going and living for God?**

2. **What promises in the Bible can you claim to stand firm and trust in God, no matter what comes your way?**

The book of Daniel, our study for first quarter 2020, by Elias Brasil de Souza, is relevant for us who are living in “the time of the end” (*Dan. 12:9*). Daniel provides evidence for our belief not only in God but also in Jesus and His death on the cross as well as the promise of His return and all that it entails. Through Daniel, we have been given the sequence of empires: Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, Rome, and God’s eternal kingdom after the Second Coming. From our perspective, we can see that all the worldly kingdoms have come and gone as predicted—or, in the case of Rome, have come and remained, just as Daniel wrote. This is depicted in the feet and toes of Daniel 2:33, 41 and is manifest in the still-divided nations of Europe as well as the Roman Church itself. Thus, we have affirmation of biblical prophecy as solid as world history that someone living in the time of Babylon or Greece, or even in the earlier days of Rome, could not have had.

Living where we are on the prophetic time line, we see that Daniel was correct about all these kingdoms, giving us ample reasons to trust God regarding His kingdom, which is yet to come.

Lesson 1—From Reading to Understanding

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: **Christ: The Center of Daniel** (*John 5:39*)

MONDAY: **The Structure of Daniel** (*Daniel 2–7*)

TUESDAY: **Apocalyptic Prophecies in Daniel** (*Dan. 7:6*)

WEDNESDAY: **God’s Timescale** (*Dan. 8:14*)

THURSDAY: **Contemporary Relevance of Daniel** (*Dan. 9:23; 10:11, 12*)

Memory Text—*Acts 8:30, NKJV*

Sabbath Gem: The book of Daniel conveys prophetic information but is profoundly relevant to our personal lives today. But most important, Christ is the center of Daniel, as He is of the entire Bible.

Lesson 2—From Jerusalem to Babylon

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: **God’s Sovereignty** (*Dan. 1:2*)

MONDAY: **Faith Under Pressure** (*Daniel 1*)

TUESDAY: **Firm Resolution** (*Dan. 1:7–20*)

WEDNESDAY: **Unblemished and Wise** (*Dan. 1:4*)

THURSDAY: **Final Exam** (*Dan. 1:17–21*)

Memory Text—*Daniel 1:17*

Sabbath Gem: We are so used to stories that stress the faithfulness of Daniel and his friends that we may forget to exalt the faithfulness of the One who guided and sustained those four young men as they confronted the power and allure of the Babylonian Empire.

Lessons for People Who Are Legally Blind The *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* is available free in braille, on audio CD, and via online download to people who are legally blind or physically disabled. This includes individuals who, because of arthritis, multiple sclerosis, paralysis, accident, and so forth, cannot hold or focus on normal ink-print publications. Contact Christian Record Services for the Blind, Box 6097, Lincoln, NE 68506-0097. Phone: 402-488-0981; email: services@christianrecord.org; website: www.christianrecord.org.