

Ezra and Nehemiah Leaders in Israel

Lesson #13 for December 28, 2019

Scriptures: 1 Kings 12:1-16; Acts 15:7-11; John 11:46-53; Nehemiah 4:7-23; Ezra 8:21-23,31-32.

1. In this lesson we will look back over the events recorded by Ezra and Nehemiah. What was it that made them the great leaders that they were? Why did people choose to put their lives at risk by following them? What were their special relationships with God?
2. We need to remember that in their day, there was no Bible. The only inspired records they had were recorded on ancient scrolls in a language which was no longer spoken. But, when these two men realized the seriousness of the condition of God's people at that point in time, they determined to do what they could with the help of God to restore things in the land of Palestine.
3. So, what lessons can we learn from their experiences? We do not know how they had access to some of the inspired Writings. Were there collections of scrolls being kept in certain places for people to refer to? Or, were there individuals in different places who had a scroll here and a scroll there? Near the end of their experience in Palestine, Ezra pulled together what was at that time probably the very first collection of scrolls that might have been regarded as a kind of Bible, the portion which we call *the Old Testament*.
4. Were there other non-inspired writings being circulated at the same time? If so, how did Ezra and/or Nehemiah decide which scrolls were inspired and which scrolls were not?
5. By definition, human beings are human. We sometimes do things which are good, and we sometimes do things which are not good. When we find ourselves in leadership positions, our examples become even more important. Look at some examples of people whose influences were significant, either for good or for bad, as recorded in Scripture.
6. Read **1 Kings 12:1-16**. Rehoboam foolishly followed the advice of his young friends as they all felt that thereby, somehow, they might enjoy the prosperity and wealth of Rehoboam's father, Solomon. They did not think of the effects their actions might have on others.
7. Read **Acts 15:7-11**. Peter had grown up with the usual prejudices and thinking of a Jewish male national. But, God had worked with him through the years. First, there was his discipleship with Jesus. Then, there was his experience with the vision at Joppa and soon after that, his interaction with Cornelius, the centurion at Caesarea Maritime, and his family. From those experiences Peter recognized that he needed to set aside his natural/national prejudices and stand up for the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles because he had personally witnessed that God had clearly poured out His Spirit on Cornelius and his family just as He had upon the disciples at Pentecost. Clearly, God made no distinction between Jew and Gentile when it came to acceptance of the gospel and giving the Holy Spirit.
8. Read **2 Kings 23:1-10**. Josiah, the young king, when he heard portions of the books of Moses read to him after they were found in the temple, determined that he would do what was right. He did everything he could to get rid of the pagan priests, the temple prostitutes, and the idols that had been placed in Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. He used whatever

influence he could to restore the correct worship of God in the land of Judah.

9. Read **Judges 4:1-16**. Deborah was working as the spiritual and civil leader of the people of Israel. She was serving as a so-called *judge*. But, enemy forces were gathering on the borders of Israel and were determined to take back the territory that had been gained by the Israelites. Jabin, a Canaanite king, and those working with him seemed to have an indomitable force raised against the Israelites.
10. Deborah as a prophet of God led the people by giving right decisions when they came to her. When she received a message from God, she did not hesitate to give that message to the intended recipient, Barak. When Barak was reluctant to go to war without her spiritual support, she went with him. She was not afraid to place herself in physical danger, if necessary, to lead God's people.
11. Read **1 Kings 21:1-16**. King Ahab was an evil king and was so selfish that when he saw a beautiful vineyard not far from his palace, he was determined to have it. That vineyard belonged to Naboth as an inherited property. King Ahab knew the rules about not selling one's inherited property; but, that did not matter to him or his evil wife, Jezebel. So, Jezebel went through an elaborate proceeding to arrange for the death of Naboth so they could take his vineyard. Ahab let his evil desires totally dominate his thinking. He married Jezebel, the high priestess of Baal, from Sidon. Then, he ignored what he knew were the directions given by God regarding personal property and, instead, followed the advice of his evil wife who arranged for Naboth to be falsely accused and murdered so Ahab could take Naboth's vineyard!
12. We can see clearly from these stories that those who chose to follow Satan's example and acted out of selfish motives ended up being very evil; those who followed God's advice—no matter how impossible it might have seemed to do so—were blessed by Him.
13. Read **1 Kings 15:26,34 and 2 Kings 13:1-3**. Unfortunately, these verses give a picture which is frequently repeated in the history of the Jewish people. When the king chose to go in an evil direction, the people followed. Why do you think that was? There must have been some who chose not to follow the evil of their peers; but, they were probably relatively few. Remember God's statement to Elijah as recorded in 1 Kings 19:18 (*GNB*) just after the experience at the cave, saying: "Seven thousand people alive in Israel—all those who are loyal to me and have not bowed to Baal or kissed his idol." This was at a time when Elijah thought that only he among all of Israel and Judah was loyal to God.
14. Read **John 11:45-53**. Think of the story of Lazarus. Jesus was on the other side of the Jordan, staying away from the Jewish leaders because He knew they wanted to kill Him. Word was sent to Jesus that Lazarus was seriously ill, and Jesus was asked to go quickly. Jesus delayed, until, by the time He arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had been dead for four days. It was the belief of people in Jesus's day that the spirit of a person would hover around the place of burial for three days just in case there was some kind of a resuscitation. For this reason, Jesus waited four days so there would be no question about the fact that Lazarus was really dead. This fact was confirmed by Martha when she said, "There will be a bad smell!" (John 11:39, *GNB*) Jesus knew that the Sadducees who did not believe it was possible to rise from the dead had not been so vehemently against Him in the past but would be very alarmed to have a man walking around who had been dead for four days. So, Jesus knew in advance that by raising Lazarus from the dead, He was

sealing His own earthly destiny. But, He went ahead and did it because He recognized that He needed to stand up for the truth no matter what the consequences would be. In this case, the consequences were devastatingly negative.

15. So, how many of our actions on a day-by-day basis are done—even if we realize there might be bad consequences—because we want to stand up for the truth of God?
16. Ezra and Nehemiah had very strong relationships with God. Those relationships were based on their understandings of God's statements from the scrolls and also from times of fasting and prayer until their relationships with God were very close.
17. Every one of us has some kind of influence on others around us. What kind of influence is your life having on those around you? If you act in accordance with God's plan for your life, treating people fairly and with kindness, will your influence grow?
18. Read **Nehemiah 4:7-23**. When Nehemiah arrived in Palestine and after doing his survey, he challenged the children of Israel—the returned exiles—to finish the rebuilding of the wall. He knew that he was working almost in a kind of den of lions. The enemies began by making fun of him, pretending like the work he was undertaking was impossible. But, when they saw the progress that was being made, they developed more sinister plans. Nehemiah did not waste a moment because of their distractions. He refused to place himself in danger and, in fact, called the children of Israel to organize themselves so as to protect the wall builders in case of an attack from their enemies. They had the help of others of the Jews who lived among their enemies and who often notified Nehemiah in advance when there was any secret plan to attack Jerusalem. Nehemiah was surrounded by people who did everything they could to discourage, defeat, and even kill him; but, he kept on working according to God's directions. He did not allow anything to deter him.
19. There was only one way to explain that kind of courage; Nehemiah believed that he was working in partnership with God Himself. This did not mean that he/they could just sit back and let God take care of things! They prepared in whatever way they could, picking up their swords and other weapons and organizing so that they could do their part in defeating any enemy of God that might try to attack them. Where did they get all the weapons that they were keeping at hand? Did each individual have a weapon or weapons of his own that he was keeping in case he was attacked personally?
20. To inspire the Jews to action, Nehemiah told the story of how he had become the governor of Palestine. The people must have realized that several miracles had taken place to bring them to that point. This must have given them courage to follow Nehemiah.

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** 660.2.

21. Back in Persia after fasting and praying for four months, Nehemiah had received strong endorsement from the Persian emperor. He had also previously received the endorsement

of God Himself. With those two forces behind him, he felt that he could press forward, and he refused to be deterred by anyone.

22. Read **Nehemiah 2:1-10** and **Ezra 7:8-10**. These verses give us a few details of the experiences of Ezra and Nehemiah. Each of them had prayed at some length over a period of time before undertaking their perilous journeys and the tasks that God had prepared for them.
23. Both Ezra and Nehemiah realized how badly their ancestors had sinned and departed from God's plans for them. But, they saw that God was in the process of opening up ways for them to return to the promised land. They looked back to the story of Moses, leading the children of Israel out of Egypt and believed that experience of the exodus could be repeated.
24. These two men, like other great leaders, set themselves a specific goal under the guidance of God. They did not allow anything to deter them from that goal. They had purpose-driven lives. Both Ezra and Nehemiah wanted to see the country of Judah reestablished and the city of Jerusalem protected from its enemies. **But, they wanted more than just material restoration; they wanted a spiritual renewal that would have meant future prosperity for the children of Israel. They believed that was what God wanted also.**
25. Read **Ezra 8:21-23,31-32**. Was it foolish for Ezra to leave Persia with a group of refugees carrying millions of dollars worth of precious items which had been taken by Nebuchadnezzar's army from Solomon's Temple without any armed guard to protect them? Ezra had told the emperor that God was able to protect them. Having made such a statement, Ezra felt that it would have been inconsistent to go back and ask the emperor for an armed guard. So, they fasted and prayed; and then, they set out under God's protection, and they were not bothered. That journey took about four months. They traveled through many hostile territories. But, Ezra's actions were not presumptuous. They placed their entire dependence upon God.
26. Read **Nehemiah 5:14-19**. Having been assigned the responsibility of being governor of Judea, Nehemiah could easily have demanded a significant salary to sustain himself. He did not. More than that, he took of his own money to buy back Jews who had been sold into slavery to foreigners; and then, he provided food and housing for up to 150 of the Jewish people over a considerable period of time. He even spelled out how much food and how many animals had to be killed to provide a fresh supply of food. But, once again, Nehemiah believed that God would sustain him even if he made no claim to a large salary. Where did he get that money? Nehemiah humbly served the people of Jerusalem.
27. Nehemiah used a lot of money in supporting all the people he fed and housed over those twelve years during his first governorship. From where did all that money come? He refused the salary which he could have claimed as a governor.
28. Read **Mark 9:35**. When Jesus told His disciples that to be first, they must serve others, was that a reflection of what Nehemiah had done? We need to remember that true leaders do not just tell others what to do; they join them and work together for God's cause.

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** 677.1; CC* 269.4.

29. Do you think of yourself as a leader? Have you explored the role of servant-leadership? Is it essential for a Christian leader to be a servant before he can be a leader? Both Ezra and Nehemiah had lives that were constantly being guided by God through prayer and fasting. Do we know how to live that kind of life? If a crisis arises, do we know how to stand firm for God’s side?
30. In the early lessons of this quarter, we read passages from Nehemiah 8. Ezra stood up in front of the entire Jewish community and read the writings of Moses in Hebrew and, then, had them translated into the language which the people spoke and understood at that point in time. That reading and understanding led to an enormous reformation among the people. **Everyone who was old enough to understand went home rejoicing because all the people had understood what God’s Word said to them.**
31. Ezra and Nehemiah arrived on the scene about 80 years after the first returnees had arrived in Jerusalem from Babylon and Persia. Why do you think God had to wait that long before finding the right circumstances for doing what they did? Was there no one earlier that could and would follow God’s plans for Jerusalem and the Jews? Did other plans fail? Did God call others, and they declined to follow God’s plan? Because of their relationship with God and their dependence upon Him, Ezra and Nehemiah demonstrated courage, fortitude, energy, and generosity to bring about the work that needed to be done. They went about that work humbly, with a determination that could not be thwarted. They were honest, transparent, and persevering. Ezra and Nehemiah did not have time to waste doing frivolous things. Their very lives depended on being alert “24/7.” At one period in time, Nehemiah did not even take off his clothes at night so that he would be ready in case of an enemy attack that could have happened at any moment.
32. Are we dedicating our lives by daily and hourly prayer to finishing the gospel in our day? Are we dedicating ourselves to a careful understanding of Scripture and earnest prayer and fasting as they did to accomplish the necessary goals? Ezra was recognized as a scholar in the Word of God before he began the part of his life that we know about. As we have seen in earlier lessons, Ezra was a diligent student, even of the beliefs and practices of paganism in Persia. But, although he knew about those pagan practices, Ezra firmly set his mind to follow the one true God.
33. Would you have joined Ezra in that perilous journey to Palestine? What do you think was appealing about that journey? Were only the poor, the needy, and the helpless willing to leave Babylonia and Persia and go with Ezra to Palestine? Or, did he also have some wealthy, successful people who were willing to leave their comfortable lives and follow

Ezra? Successful, bold people were needed to get the job done.

34. We are told that after receiving that bad news from Jerusalem that the city and the people were not safe, Nehemiah wept and prayed. He engaged in prayer and fasting for four months before the opportune moment came for him to make his appeal to the emperor and empress. Did God somehow communicate to Nehemiah what He wanted him to do? Did Nehemiah realize that he had the skills and the support of God to do all that he did?
35. So, we see that long periods of fasting and prayer, communion with God, and the reading of Scripture led to the rebuilding of Palestine and Jerusalem, all, eventually, according to God's plans.
36. How would you describe your Bible study and prayer habits? What could you as a group of Sabbath school members do to encourage others in prayer and Bible study?
37. As a Sabbath school class or church group, have you ever set aside a day for fasting and prayer for some important thing that needed to be done in your area? What things could we do to encourage unselfish giving among our church members? Have you ever been tempted just to give up because it seemed like it was too difficult? What lessons of persistence, or encouragement, have you learned from your own personal religious experience? Are there promises that you regularly claim from the Bible in your relationship with God?

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