

## ***Ezra and Nehemiah*** ***God's Call***

Lesson #3 for October 19, 2019

Scriptures: Ezra 7:10; Nehemiah 1:1-11; Daniel 8; 9:24-27; Romans 8:28-29; 9; Exodus 3&4.

1. What does it mean to be *called by God*? Does God call us to a specific task? Does God gift us for a specific task or tasks? How does God decide whom He should call? How are we supposed to know if God has called us? For which task? To finish the gospel?
2. In this lesson we will focus primarily on Ezra and Nehemiah. Each was called to a specific, but quite different, task. But, both of their skills were needed in order to accomplish what needed to be done. The children of Israel needed to be called back to God to re-dedicate their lives to serving Him, and then, God would help them to rebuild their city.
3. What might have happened if either Ezra or Nehemiah had not been able to do the tasks which God called them to do? Would we not have a Bible? Would the Jewish people have faded into history as the northern ten tribes of Israel had done? Did some of the people from the northern tribes come back?
4. What things qualified Ezra to do the job he was called to do by God? He was a scholar. He had leadership skills. He was a skilled teacher. He had committed his life to the writings of the Bible.

**Ezra 7:10:** Ezra had devoted his life to studying the Law of the LORD, to practising it, and to teaching all its laws and regulations to the people of Israel.—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation\** (2nd ed., Ezra 7:10). New York: American Bible Society.

5. We know almost nothing about Ezra's job or work or life before he was called by God for this particular task. We know his genealogy, (Ezra 7:1-5) that he had access to the emperor, and that he was a scholar with a thorough knowledge of Moses's writings; (Ezra 7:6-7) that is all.
6. As we do know, Ezra managed to get permission from the emperor to organize a group of people who were willing to go back to Jerusalem to assist in reestablishing their relationship with God in their homeland.
7. What do you think Ezra was doing during those 13 years between the time he arrived in Jerusalem and the time when Nehemiah arrived? We know that Ezra collected all the copies of Scripture that he could find and probably taught people how to duplicate and copy them. Ezra is recognized as the first of the *scribes* we talked about in an earlier lesson.
8. Why was Nehemiah chosen? Read Nehemiah 1:1-11. What work did Nehemiah do before God called him? Would you have chosen a wine taster to be one of the leaders of God's people? Of course, we know that Nehemiah wept and prayed and even fasted for the people of Jerusalem for four months after hearing the report of how things were going there. He had a heart for the work of God.
9. Do you think Ezra and Nehemiah were excited about the jobs that God chose for them to do? Contrast Jonah! Does God sometimes choose us to do things we really like to do? Or, does God only choose people to do difficult, challenging jobs that might at first seem impossible?
10. What does it take to get a person excited about studying the gospel and sharing it with others? Is that something that can be learned? Or, is that some kind of gift from God?
11. Do you think God arranged for Ezra and Nehemiah each to have a special relationship with the emperor—the most powerful person in the world at that time—so they could do what He asked them to do?

12. The decree that Artaxerxes I issued to Ezra in the year 457 B.C. would probably be of relatively minor importance except for the prophecy that Daniel had given decades earlier as recorded in Daniel 9:24-27. Why do you think God gave part of the message to Daniel and many years later gave another part of the message to Ezra, and then later, completed the job with the help of Nehemiah? And why did God give those messages specifically in Daniel 9:24-27 in such cryptic language?
13. Seventh-day Adventists have sometimes almost suggested that this prophecy in Daniel 9:24-27 and the linking of it to the earlier prophecy in Daniel 8:14 which was discovered and first interpreted by William Miller was almost a specific message for us and our church.
14. But, we are not the first ones to have recognized the correct interpretation of those passages pointing down to the correct time of the arrival of the Messiah. The Jewish leaders at the time of the birth of Jesus knew where He was going to be born. (Micah 5:2) They also knew that it was about the right time for the Messiah to come. Many years later, some of the Jewish leaders, recognizing that Daniel had prophesied correctly the time of the Messiah's arrival and not wanting to admit that they had rejected the Messiah wrote the following rabbinic curse:

May the bones of the hands and the bones of the fingers decay, and decompose, of him who turns the pages of the book of Daniel, to find out the time [of Daniel 9:24-27], and may his memory rot from off the face of the earth forever.—*Talmudic Law*.<sup>‡</sup>

15. So, sometime after the days of Jesus, it seems clear that the Jewish leaders were quite convinced that He was the true Messiah. (See Acts 6:7; 15:5.) However, they did not want their people to realize that they might have missed it.
16. The Bible describes three decrees given for the restoration of the Jewish people in Jerusalem and the rest of Judea and the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes all gave different commands for accomplishing that task. Cyrus gave the first command, allowing the Jews to return home. Darius gave an additional command, allowing them to complete the rebuilding of the temple. But, only Artaxerxes gave a command which allowed for the rebuilding of the city wall of Jerusalem itself; and that decree is associated with praising God for His intervention.

**Ezra 7:17-18,27-28:** <sup>17</sup>“You are to spend this money carefully and buy bulls, rams, lambs, corn, and wine and offer them on the altar of the Temple in Jerusalem. <sup>18</sup>**You may use the silver and gold that is left over for whatever you and your people desire, in accordance with the will of your God....**” <sup>27</sup> Ezra said, “Praise the LORD, the God of our ancestors! He has made the emperor willing to honour in this way the Temple of the LORD in Jerusalem. <sup>28</sup>By God’s grace I have won the favour of the emperor, of his counsellors, and of all his powerful officials; the LORD my God has given me courage, and I have been able to persuade many of the heads of the clans of Israel to return with me.”—*Good News Bible*.<sup>\*†</sup>

17. That decree was a fulfillment of the criteria set out in Daniel’s prophecy.

**Daniel 8:13-14,26-27:** <sup>13</sup> Then I heard a holy one speaking, and another holy one said to the one that spoke, “For how long is this **vision** concerning the regular burnt offering, the transgression that makes desolate, and the giving over of the sanctuary and host to be trampled?” <sup>14</sup> And he answered him, “For two thousand three hundred evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary shall be restored to its rightful state”.... <sup>26</sup> “The vision of the evenings and the mornings that has been told is true. As for you, seal up the **vision**, for it refers to many days from now.”

<sup>27</sup> So I, Daniel, was overcome and lay sick for some days; then I arose and went about the king's business. But I was dismayed by the **vision** and did not **understand** it.—*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*.<sup>\*</sup> (1989). (Daniel 8:13-14,26–27). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.<sup>†</sup>

18. **Compare Daniel 9:23:** “At the beginning of your supplications a word went out, and I have come to declare it, for you are greatly beloved. So consider the word and **understand** the **vision**.”—*New Revised Standard Version*.<sup>\*†</sup>

**There are many reasons the 70-week prophecy of Daniel 9:24-27 and the 2,300 evenings and mornings prophecy of Daniel 8:14 belong together: (1) both are time prophecies; (2) the specific terminology of “vision” and “understanding” links them (see *Dan. 8:26, 27 and 9:23*); (3) both interpretations of the prophecies were given by Gabriel (see *Dan. 8:16 and 9:21*); (4) the only part of the vision not explained in Daniel 8 was the vision about the 2,300 evenings and mornings (sometimes translated as “days”) in Daniel 8:14; (5) Daniel 8 contains the vision and then a partial interpretation of it, while Daniel 9 has an interpretation only, in this case the interpretation of the only part of Daniel 8 not interpreted—which was the 2,300-day prophecy of Daniel 8:14, the one part of the vision that Daniel had not understood (see *Dan. 8:27*).—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*<sup>\*</sup> for Tuesday, October 15.<sup>†</sup> [Italic type is in the source.]<sup>‡</sup>**

19. By carefully comparing these passages from Daniel we discovered that:

**70 Weeks (490 years)**

**457 B.C. - A.D. 34**

**2,300 days (2,300 years)**

**490 years - 1,810 years**

**457 B.C. - A.D. 34 - 1844**

20. Why do you think God chose to link the 70-week prophecy and the 2300-day prophecy to that decree from Artaxerxes? Why is our interpretation rejected by almost everyone else?
21. Even the shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem had a pretty good idea that the 70-week prophecy was ending and that it was time for the Messiah to come. (See GC 314.1-2.)
22. If those humble shepherds who were probably uneducated had a pretty good idea about the timing of the prophecies, shouldn't we be able to get them right?

The time of Christ's coming, His anointing by the Holy Spirit, His death, and the giving of the gospel to the Gentiles, were definitely pointed out. It was the privilege of the Jewish people to understand these prophecies, and to recognize their fulfillment in the mission of Jesus. Christ urged upon His disciples the importance of prophetic study. Referring to the prophecy given to Daniel in regard to their time, He said, “Whoso readeth, let him understand.” Matt. 24:15. After His resurrection He explained to the disciples in “all the prophets” “the things concerning Himself [on the road to Emmaus].” Luke 24:27. The Saviour had spoken through all the prophets. “The Spirit of Christ which was in them” “testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow.” 1 Peter 1:11.—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*<sup>\*</sup> 234.1.<sup>‡</sup>

23. In Isaiah chapters 40-55, God makes it clear that one of His distinguishing features is His

ability to predict future events far in advance. Is this now the proof?

24. What does it mean when we say *God's election*? Has God chosen you for a specific position or task?

**Romans 8:28-30:** <sup>28</sup> We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him, those whom he has called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> Those whom God had already chosen he also set apart to become like his Son, so that the Son would be the eldest brother in a large family. <sup>30</sup> And so those whom God set apart, he called; and those he called, he put right with himself, and he shared his glory with them.—*Good News Bible*.\*

25. Has it seemed to be true in your life that in all things God works for good? The wording of Romans 8:28 in the *King James Version* is not correct. In the original Greek, it does not say, "All things work together for good." Instead, the Greek says, "In all things, God works for good."
26. Is it clear from Romans 8:29 that God intends for each of us to be conformed to the image of His Son? Do we all manage to do that? Of course not. But, that was God's plan for us. More than that, God has wonderful plans for those who cooperate with His call. He wants to glorify them!
27. In Romans 9-11, Paul took on a major challenge that he must have struggled with mentally for some time. That challenge was to understand exactly how God planned to relate to Paul's fellow countrymen, the Jews. See especially Romans 9:11-13 regarding Jacob and Esau.
28. If you read these verses and do not understand anything about the historical background that Paul was referring to, it can be seriously misinterpreted. God had promised Abraham that his descendants would be the ancestors of the Messiah. He also promised him that his descendants would possess the land of Canaan. But, who was going to do that? We know that Abraham had one son with Hagar, one son with Sarah, and six more sons with Keturah whom he married after Sarah's death. (Genesis 25:1-2) Were all of those sons to be the heirs of the promise? We know that is not true. God had specifically chosen Isaac and then, later, Jacob to be the ones who would be the ancestors of Jesus. Does that suggest that God arbitrarily chooses someone and that person has no choice in the matter? We know that is not true. Paul went on to say that even in the Old Testament, God specifically said that He would work with not only the Jews but also Gentiles. See Romans 9:22-33; Hosea 2:23; 1:10; Isaiah 10:22-23.
29. God had chosen Abraham and his descendants to be the lights to the world. They were supposed to spread the gospel to nations far and near. But, they failed to do the task for which God had chosen them.
30. When Paul quoted Malachi 1:2-3 (425 B.C.) in Romans 9:13 (*GNB*\*), saying: "I loved Jacob, but I hated Esau," those words were spoken many, many years later, long after Jacob and Esau were dead and the various very different choices made by Jacob's descendants versus Esau's descendants were already apparent.
31. Thus, it should be apparent to all of us that God has at least two different ways of choosing or of "electing" people: (1) God chooses every one of us to be saved. We, of course, can defeat God's choice by our own decisions or choices. (2) God chooses different people for specific tasks; consider, once again, the stories of Ezra and Nehemiah.
32. How does it make you feel to know that you have been chosen for salvation?
33. God's choice or God's election will never remove your free choice. Unfortunately, most of the world's population have rejected God's election for them to be saved.
34. Think of the story of King Saul. The people had asked Samuel to give them a king.

Recognizing how disastrous that would be, God nevertheless “chose” for them a king of the kind they wanted. Saul was never God’s ideal choice. And we know what the results were. Later, God chose the kind of person He wanted; we know the story of David. (1 Samuel 13:14)

35. Review Exodus 3&4. Moses had been educated to be a leader, in fact, a pharaoh of Egypt. But, then he felt like his life was threatened after he had killed a man for abusing an Israelite. He fled to Midian. After spending 40 years herding sheep, he was quite certain that there was no future for him back in Egypt. But, he was so wrong!
36. Moses’s life really “began” at age 80! But, Moses was a reluctant recipient of God’s call. He tried to back out of it. He tried to claim that he was not qualified, etc. However, God kept after him until he did what God asked him to do. What a glorious end to Moses’s life.
37. Think of other people in the Bible who have had specific calls from God and in some cases have tried to get out of it. Think of the classic story of Jonah! He did just about everything he could to avoid doing what God asked him to do.
38. And think about the call of Paul. Would you have chosen the most vigorous killer of God’s people to be your greatest evangelist? (See Acts 9.)
39. And what about Judas?

The history of Judas presents the sad ending of a life that might have been honored of God. Had Judas died before his last journey to Jerusalem he would have been regarded as a man worthy of a place among the twelve, and one who would be greatly missed.—Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*\* 716.1.

40. What about God calling Ellen White to be a prophet?
41. Have you had opportunity to study carefully Daniel 8:13-14; 9:24-27; and Ezra 7:17-18 until you have clearly understood the 70-week and the 2300-day prophecies? Has the time come for us as Seventh-day Adventist Christians to review the work William Miller did and take on the challenge of understanding these passages particularly, in detail?
42. Consider the following list of important characters who were called for specific jobs.
  - Noah—commissioned to serve God before the Flood.
  - Abraham—called out to be the father of God’s people.
  - Moses—leads God’s people during the Exodus to the borders of the Promised Land.
  - Joshua—ushers God’s people into the Promised Land.
  - Samuel—judges during the beginning of the monarchical period.
  - Hosea and Amos—prophesy before the fall of the northern kingdom and Samaria in 722 B.C.
  - Ezekiel and Daniel—enter their prophetic ministry during the Babylonian exile.
  - Haggai and Zechariah—serve after the return from exile.
  - Ezra and Nehemiah—commence serving God at the beginning of 2,300 day/year prophecy (457 B.C.).
  - John the Baptist—calls Israel to repentance prior to the onset of Jesus’ ministry.
  - Stephen—witnesses, after which the gospel went to the Gentiles (at the time in which the 70-week prophecy ends, in A.D. 34).

- Ellen G. White—called at end of 2,300 day/year prophecy (1844).—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*\* 40.

43. Other prophets were called in very unusual and sometimes startling ways to work for God. Consider the experiences of Isaiah.

**Isaiah 6:7-8:** <sup>7</sup>He touched my lips with the burning coal and said, “This has touched your lips, and now your guilt is gone, and your sins are forgiven.”

<sup>8</sup> Then I heard the Lord say, “Whom shall I send? Who will be our messenger?”

I answered, “I will go! Send me!”—*Good News Bible*.\*

44. Have you ever been called by God to do something, and you refused to do it?

45. Before leaving this lesson, we should review how *predestination* has been interpreted in very different ways by different Christian leaders down through the generations. But, in the Bible *predestination* has three basic meanings:

1. God predestined that there is only one way of salvation, namely, through Jesus Christ (*John 14:6, Acts 4:12*). We are elected in Christ to eternal life if we accept Him as our personal Savior (*Rom. 8:29, Eph. 1:3-8*). He wishes for everyone to be saved (*1 Tim. 2:3, 4*).

2. God predestined some people (both as individuals or as a community of believers) to a specific task, to a particular mission (as He ordained the faithful remnant to proclaim the eternal gospel). God has a worldwide mission (*Isa. 49:6*).

3. God has predestined the final climax of human history when He will come as Judge and give His reward (*Daniel 2*). The ultimate outcome will be His eschatological triumph. The goal of the electing will of God is not the salvation of a few but the gathering of as many people as possible from among the nations into the final eschatological gathering (*Rev. 21:3*).—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*\* 42. [Italic type is in the source.]<sup>†</sup>

46. Think of the challenges that Ezra faced as he tried to reorient the people of Israel on the return from Babylon and Persia. They had lived all their lives surrounded by various forms of idolatry. We will learn in later lessons about some fairly harsh ways that Ezra and Nehemiah had to deal with challenging situations among the people. They recognized that in order to survive, the children of Israel must have an unreserved commitment to the true God. Somehow, Ezra and Nehemiah and those who followed them convinced the children of Israel that at least the open forms of idolatry were never to be practiced by them again.

47. As we know, 13 years after Ezra arrived back in Jerusalem, Nehemiah arrived. Nehemiah was a man of action. And since Ezra had prepared the way, the people were prepared to act. The results were marvelous; in 52 days, the wall was completed.

48. Considering what we know about the prophets that we have studied in this lesson, does Ellen White belong in that list? Have you prayed to God, asking Him what He wants you to do? How would you recognize His call? Do you think God would choose you to do something that was exciting to you? Or, would God rather choose for you something that was hard and challenging? What are your passions? What kind of things that God wants us to do in this day might inspire you to act?

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\*Electronic version. <sup>†</sup>Bold type is added. <sup>‡</sup>Text in brackets is added.

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