

EZRA NEHEMIAH ESTHER Bible Reading Schedule

4 Weeks

WEEK 1

These three Old Testament books are often grouped together because they happen around the same time in history. They are the post-captivity historical books. The prophetic messages of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi coincide with what we will be reading this month. You might venture over to those prophetic books also. Nonetheless, you can anticipate diving into the fascinating story of exile to the promise of freedom. God, through his faithful prophets, said that the people of Judah would be taken into captivity because of their idolatry and sinfulness. But he also promised that they would return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city, the temple, and the nation.

You might not be very familiar with Ezra but he is a real hero. You will get to see him in action beginning in chapter 7. Previously, Ezra served as a historian filling in the narrative of the closing exile in Babylon with pilgrims returning home. 2nd Chronicles ends with Cyrus, the king of Persia asking for volunteers to return to Jerusalem to build a house for God. This is where Ezra picks up the story which he records in this book. Oral tradition kept the facts alive so that Ezra could give us 6 chapters leading up to the time when he enters the scene. Ezra is sure to be an inspiration to us and a man worth emulating.

DAY 1 – Ezra 1 & 2

I have read through Ezra and believe that two chapters a day would help us progress through the book at an appropriate pace. Cyrus is the first character we are introduced to with a gracious offer to the people of God. Even though King Cyrus conquered many lands, he most often treated the inhabitants with mercy. This is the nature of someone who had been influenced by God because Cyrus had every reason to be proud and even cruel. Cyrus was not considered a servant of Yahweh but God used him for his purposes. The prophet Isaiah predicted this over 100 years before in Isaiah 44:28 to 45:6 which is an amazing historical fact. “Everyone whose heart God had moved...” (1:5) which was also the words used about Cyrus in 1:1. After 48 years of exile, the arrogant Jewish nation had been humbled. This coincides with God’s kindness in delivering his people; with this change of heart came the promise of God to rescue them. Again, Cyrus surprises us with his generosity as he gives the articles of the temple to the people returning. (1:7) Nebuchadnezzar had placed these valuable treasures in his pagan temples but Cyrus graciously returned them. Why? Because God moved his heart to do so. Isn’t that fascinating?! So, 2:64 tells us that 42,360 Jewish people returned but that means many did not; in fact, more stayed than left. But don’t be too critical, the trip would have been far from easy. It would have lasted over four months with danger and difficulty as the travel routes were very rugged and the expense would be significant. Many Jews had made a living and accumulated possessions in exile and leaving would mean letting all of that go. I am impressed with the number who left because their heart was to rebuild God’s temple so that his name might be honored again. Frankly, I don’t remember reading Ezra with such a

deep desire to see the hand of God working on behalf of his people. But this first day has not disappointed me. I feel very inspired. How do you respond to our launch into Ezra's historical record of the exiles returning to their homeland?

DAY 2 – Ezra 3 & 4

Ezra writes about the rebuilding of the temple in these two chapters. The most confusing verses are found in chapter 4. Verses 6 through 23 are a summary of the entire story of the opposition in building the temple, the reconstruction of the wall, as well as other aspects of the city. Ezra knew these events firsthand because they took place when Ezra and Nehemiah were leading the people. The previous attempts at rebuilding the temple are known to Ezra because they are a part of the history under Cyrus and Darius. But in 4:6-23, Ezra wrote about the topic from his personal experience to highlight the persistent opposition to God's people over the years and God's ability to overcome them. We know from this book that the outcome of the story is a completed temple in chapter 6 attributed to Ezra as the author of his own book. I also had a question about 3:12 which tells us that many of the leaders "wept aloud" when they saw the new Temple's foundation. Why would this be? Most likely there was a sense of disappointment because the Temple was not nearly as wonderful as the one that Solomon built. However, the people shouted for joy, nonetheless. Chapter 4:1-5 highlights an important dimension of why Ezra included this part of the story. The people living near Jerusalem claimed to worship the same God, but they actually worshiped several gods in addition to Israel's God. If the Jews had joined with these people, they soon would have compromised their beliefs and be led astray, just as Israel had done before the Exile. The purity and identity of God's people needed to be reestablished on the foundation of God's commands and principles. This was the main concern of our author, Ezra the Priest! The temple would be on hold for 15 years because of opposition which we will read about tomorrow. Ezra is setting the stage for his arrival but also filling in the history of God's people as they return from exile. How might we face opposition more courageously?

DAY 3 – Ezra 5 & 6

After several years of opposition, a new governor writes a more favorable letter to King Darius. He does not try to taint the motivation for rebuilding the temple. He ties it to the faith of these returning exiles and relays their letter of explanation without putting his own spin on it. Darius' reply in chapter 6 had to be God-inspired. In fact, the King tells the locals to help them rebuild it. And if you choose not to do so, here's the outcome: "Those who violate this decree in any way will have a beam pulled from their house. Then they will be lifted up and impaled on it, and their house will be reduced to a pile of rubble." (6:11) That is definitely direct and convincing. The completion of the temple is recorded on March 12, 515BC with a celebration and festival commemorating God's deliverance known as the Passover. This would have been the first time that such an event was celebrated since their return over 20 years ago. It has been suggested that Daniel's influence touched the life of Cyrus the Persian who was also known as Darius the Mede. This would still be part of the story of Darius I who was King after Darius (a name associated with the King) from 521 to 486. He treated the Jews kindly and chose to affirm their efforts to rebuild a temple for the great God of Judah. I am drawn to the idea that Daniel had a lasting impact on the rulers of Persia. His legacy would live on as he served from 605 to 535 in Babylon as well as Persia. I

have been thinking about legacy more often and this idea came to mind. Why was Darius kind to the Jews? What do you notice in these two chapters that stirs your heart?

DAY 4 – Ezra 7 & 8

Now we get to meet Ezra upfront and personal. When 7:1 says, “many years later,” we are actually able to deduce the number which is 57 years later. Previously, Ezra has been filling in the history of God’s people. Many scholars believe that he wrote 1 & 2 Chronicles as well. He was more than a priest; he was a scribe and a strong leader. Frankly, I think Ezra is proud of the persistence of his people as they had been opposed by the inhabitants of that area. On the other hand, God’s people were gradually but most certainly being influenced by the surrounding people. This was troubling to Ezra, of course. We will read about some of the specifics tomorrow. Ezra is an impressive man of God who was qualified to teach, preach, and interpret the Scriptures. More than that, King Artaxerxes respected Ezra and trusted him with people and possessions as we read in Artaxerxes’s letter (7:12-26). The final paragraph in chapter 7 is Ezra’s humble tribute to God. Ezra’s approach to the Lord, people, possessions, and the challenges of travel and leadership are amazing examples for us. “And praise him (Yahweh) for demonstrating such unfailing love to me by honoring me before the king, his council, and all his mighty nobles.” (7:28) The story of chapter 8 is equally as fascinating to me because, for whatever reason, there weren’t enough Levitical priests joining the caravan. Ezra is patient and trusting God even though those priests willing to go with him were small in number. Nonetheless, about 5000 people get ready to make the journey with Ezra. Again, his spiritual leadership shines bright as he calls for a fast to pray for a safe journey and God’s sufficient protection. (8:21) The trip was 800 miles which would take 4 months. God honored his faith and the second group of exiles under Ezra’s leadership arrived safely. Tomorrow we will anticipate the disappointing discovery of spiritual decline among the exiles who had returned over 50 years previously. But today we appreciate a godly man like Ezra. What do you notice about Ezra from our reading today?

DAY 5 – Ezra 9 & 10

I am sure this is a troubling portion of Scripture for you. If we realized how much was at stake, I think we would understand it better. The people of God were scattered because of idolatry and sinfulness. But God preserved a remnant for his purposes with the plan to be fulfilled by sending the Messiah as a descendant of this increasingly small nation. For this reason, God had warned his people not to intermarry with unbelieving foreigners. The sin was not that they married people from another country or race but that they married people committed to another religion with many gods. This principle is still one we are called to obey. We refer to it as unequally yoked. I do not officiate weddings for a couple when one spouse is a believer and the other is not. The marriage covenant is sacred. To compromise this principle would further fragment God’s people and lead to wholesale unfaithfulness. Ezra’s solution is not prescriptive for believers today. In fact, if a believer is now married to an unbeliever, the Apostle Paul encourages them to stay the course for the sanctification of the children and the possible salvation of the unbelieving spouse (1 COR 7:12-16). But the identity and purity of God’s people in Ezra’s day could be stained beyond recognition. At times we view sin casually. But later on, the consequences can be very severe. The consequences of how casually the exiles viewed marriage and the compromise they so easily embraced made the future especially uncertain. We know of nations who at one time were strong and influential but now are nonexistent. This was not an option in God’s sovereign plan preparing for the

arrival of his Son. The Lord often used extreme measures to protect the plan leading to the Messiah. How clear is your purity and identity as a believer in Jesus Christ? Do you understand the importance of your testimony in this dark world?

WEEK 2

The setting for Nehemiah is summarized in the reading of Ezra which we did last week. In 538 BC, the Persian king Cyrus decreed that the Jews could return home to rebuild the sacred temple. Those 50,000 people are the emphasis of Ezra 1-6. A second group of about 5000, under the leadership of Ezra, returned in 458 BC. Ezra's efforts did not solve all the problems in Jerusalem so the Lord would raise up a man named Nehemiah.

Nehemiah left a comfortable job as the assistant to the king of Persia in order to help the demoralized people of Jerusalem. His new work involved motivating the people to rebuild the city's walls in spite of their neighbor's opposition. Nehemiah's work was not just with bricks and mortar. He also mediated a financial crisis, initiated religious reforms with the help of Ezra, and reorganized civic responsibilities in Jerusalem. Nehemiah demonstrated that with faith, prayer, integrity, and God's help, a servant of the Lord can succeed.

DAY 6 – Nehemiah 1

This is a short chapter of introduction but it reveals the heart of Nehemiah for the Lord and for his people. We could have read more but I want us to ease on into this marvelous book about God's providence and his help for us when we face opposition. For me, Nehemiah's prayer is a model for us on how to pray earnestly and effectively. Nehemiah's prayer includes praise, confession, God's word, and petition. Verses 8 & 9 are a recollection of something God already had said to Moses. This is essentially God's Word. These statements in prayer come from Deuteronomy 4:25-31 and 30:1-5. I have found that praying the Scriptures is an especially important aspect of prayer. Nehemiah sites a promise from God in the prayer. This reminds me of a time when I prayed for a teenager who was in a bad accident and bleeding internally. The doctors weren't sure he was going to make it. But I knew that this boy had honored his father and mother. So, I prayed the command that when you honor your father and mother, your days will be long on the earth and the Lord spared the life of that boy the next day. He is paralyzed from the waist down which is obviously very difficult but God intervened and now he serves the Lord as a pastor from a wheelchair. Praying the Scriptures might be the most neglected tool in prayer that we have. I also appreciate the outline of the prayer that Nehemiah demonstrates. I pray something similar: P – pause; R – rejoice; A – ask; Y – yield! I so often experience a meaningful time in prayer using this approach. 10 to 15 minutes of prayer flies by as I pray in this way! How might God be speaking to you through this first chapter?

DAY 7 – Nehemiah 2

Nehemiah knew that he would have to speak with the King before being able to help his people in Jerusalem. Chapter 1 ends with Nehemiah's request, "Please grant me success today by making the king favorable to me." (1:11) The word "today" is especially interesting because chapter 2 takes place 4 months later. Nehemiah's opportunity to talk to the King was delayed for several months which is something we might even overlook. When the time came to be honest with the King it says, "Then I was terrified." (2:2) Why? The King could do anything he wanted and if Nehemiah displeased him, he could be executed. Maybe the King would think his concern was a sign of weakness. No matter what was on

Nehemiah's mind, his first response was to pray, "With a prayer to the God of heaven..." (2:4) This means that Nehemiah whispered a prayer in his heart before he told the King what was on his heart. This will be a theme in this book. Nehemiah is a man of prayer. There will be almost a dozen references in the book of Nehemiah speaking to the Lord in prayer. God gave Nehemiah favor before the King which is the first half of this chapter. But he was not just a man of prayer, he also was a man of action. As he arrives in Jerusalem, within three days he is investigating the situation and assessing what needs to be done. Nehemiah needed firsthand knowledge of the broken-down walls so he could present a credible plan. Others could have previously done what Nehemiah was doing, but they did not have the faith or the courage to follow through. Nehemiah gives us a marvelous picture of godly leadership. What do you appreciate about Nehemiah in this chapter? How might you follow his example?

DAY 8 – Nehemiah 3 & 4

Reading two chapters seems like the best way to proceed since chapter 3 is a record of those who were involved in the project and what part they played. The crux of the story is when the foreigners threatened and opposed the reconstruction project in chapter 4. The wall of Jerusalem was far more significant than you might realize. It was a tangible symbol of political and religious stability. The destroyed wall was a shameful reminder that God had allowed destruction and defeat because of the people's sins. On the other hand, a rebuilt wall would be a sign of God's blessing and proof that God was bringing the promised restoration to his covenant people. Israel's enemies knew that if the wall was rebuilt, the Jews would gain political power, security, and self-determination, and so they opposed it fiercely. As chapter 4 begins, we read of the intensity the opposed feel as they also mocked the Jews and their efforts to rebuild. But our man of God prays in verses 4 & 5 for God's help and his prayer asks for judgment on the opposition. Without Nehemiah's strong leadership, I would suggest to you that the Jews would have given up before the wall was half-done. Nehemiah is practical but also motivational. Nehemiah posted guards, prayed for God's help, developed an emergency warning system, and kept working. The final verse includes a statement that they "(n)ever took off our clothes." (4:23) This portrays being alert and persevering to the end with no breaks. You can see how important Nehemiah was to God's plan. The story is not over yet, but we sense a hopeful outcome because the leader is trusting God and remaining strong in the battle. How does Nehemiah's plan to rebuild the wall strike you? What do you learn from chapter 4 which is full of opposition?

DAY 9 – Nehemiah 5

If it wasn't enough for Nehemiah to deal with the opposition of enemy people, now he had some very significant challenges among his own people. Confronting the problem required a firm commitment to the principles outlined in God's Word and a boldness to insist that the people follow these divine instructions. In Leviticus 25:35-37, God's instruction is quite clear and Nehemiah intended to follow it. "Do not charge interest or make a profit at his (fellow Israelite) expense. Instead, show your fear of God by letting him live with you as your relative." (25:36) Nehemiah demonstrated genuine humility, servant leadership, amazing courage, and personal generosity. God used his example to convict the wealthy, the nobles, and the officials for charging interest and creating great hardship for their fellow citizens. But it is a surprise to me that the people willingly and even quickly submitted to Nehemiah's commands. This had to be an encouragement to him. He had earned the right to be heard as he sacrificed much to return

to Jerusalem and continued to give of himself day and night. There's much to appreciate in this chapter and much to apply to our own lives. How might God be speaking to you through this chapter? I feel like the circumstances of God's people in that day, during a time of conflict and hardship, still speak strongly to us in our modern world. Humility, service, courage, and generosity are still primary qualities to be found in a believer. How are these qualities real in you and through you?

DAY 10 – Nehemiah 6

In spite of all the challenges and opposition, the delegation under Nehemiah finished the wall in 52 days. This miraculous outcome got the attention of those who opposed them with these words, "They realized this work had been done with the help of our God." (V16) This is a fantastic way to wrap up our readings for this week. It reminds me of Ephesians 3:20, "Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or imagine." At the same time, I am also impressed with Nehemiah again. He seems to discern the real motives behind what these enemy leaders plan to do. He does not give in to their deceptive plans. There's another verse that comes to mind in this case, "But I fear that somehow your pure and undivided devotion to Christ will be corrupted, just as Eve was deceived by the cunning ways of the serpent." (2 COR 11:3) But not Nehemiah; he saw through their cunning ways. And again, we see Nehemiah praying as he specifically prays against his enemies. He does not take revenge but leaves that up to the Lord. "Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say, 'I will take revenge; I will pay them back,' says the LORD." (Romans 12:19) There are several connect points for me in this chapter. My admiration for Nehemiah increases and my desire to follow his example only gets stronger. What aspect of Nehemiah's life highlighted in this chapter compels the most?

WEEK 3

Nehemiah makes it his goal to direct the people so that the kind of disarray that had transpired previously would not happen again. Ezra is a key leader in our readings this week also. These directives and reforms are meant to help the people remain loyal to the Lord and to each other. I am sure we will glean some valuable insights that still apply to our lives today.

DAY 11 – Nehemiah 7 & 8

With the census being taken and Nehemiah registering the people, chapter 7 is a quick read since we will skim over it. But chapter 8 is especially significant, in my opinion, with a marvelous display of sensitivity to the Word of God. A simple but profound statement is made in Nehemiah 8:10, “The joy of the Lord is your strength.” The assembly on October 8 gets my attention as the Book of the Law is read for several hours and is explained by the Levites to the people. God touches the people’s hearts, prompting them to regret their failures to keep God’s laws. But it is as if Nehemiah acknowledges their grief but gives them reason for dancing. “The young women will dance for joy, and the men—old and young—will join in the celebration. I will turn their mourning into joy. I will comfort them and exchange their sorrow for rejoicing.” (Jeremiah 31:13) These words are the forerunner to God’s promise for a new covenant in 31:31-34 which would be cause for incredible hope and gladness. That is what Nehemiah wanted for the people. He wanted them to experience a new beginning. In verse 9 we read that Ezra is the religious leader and Nehemiah is the governor which is an important role but not a religious role. Nehemiah was motivated by his relationship with God, and he devoted his life to doing God’s will in a secular world. Most of you serve God out of love for and concern for others like Nehemiah. I hope his wholehearted devotion inspires you. I want you to realize that no matter what your work or role in life might be, view it as God’s special calling to serve him. Amen! How does Nehemiah’s example motivate you? What does the joy of the Lord mean to you?

DAY 12 – Nehemiah 9

How do you read Nehemiah’s prayer? Do you see it as “longwinded,” or quite “worshipful?” You probably can guess what I think. Nehemiah recalls the hand of God at work from verses 6 through 31. This prayer focuses on praising God for his sovereign and powerful acts. It affirms God’s actions and how deserving the Israelites have been to be punished. There is a clear posture of humility. But verses 32 to 37 get my attention. This is when the prayer moves to the current situation. Nehemiah had the confidence to pray because he knew that everything that happened was part of God’s sovereign plan. But Nehemiah doesn’t actually ask God to do anything besides reminding the Lord of their misery. I think Nehemiah realized that when our merciful God knows we are struggling, he will respond and even rescue us. God had brought the people out of exile, so he would help them get back on their feet. Everyone is acknowledging the sinful way they had ignored the Lord and because of their sincerity, Nehemiah believed the Lord would help them. His confidence came from believing that God would keep his promises and complete the work he had started in their lives. Our God is the same today. We are invited to confidently approach God’s throne of grace to get help in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16). A meaningful way to pray to the Lord is to remember how he has worked in your life and in the lives of

those around you. I encourage you to write out a prayer like the one we read in this chapter that recalls God's goodness to you. Obviously, I also want you to pray it! How do you respond to Nehemiah's prayer?

DAY 13 – Nehemiah 10

The leaders in the community set an example for the rest of the people. The list includes 84 leaders beginning with Nehemiah. What will they promise to do? Although the community had committed itself broadly to all the instructions in the law of Moses, some specific issues were being addressed in this commitment. I think their specific pledge meant more to the Lord than the idea of "we will try harder." The first and most serious concern pertained to intermarriage. Ezra 9 – 10 addresses this breach of trust and contamination of the people. The people surrounding the Israelites worshiped other gods and their idols. Soon the distinction of being God's people would be lost if they had a casual view of marriage to pagan spouses. Then, the gift of the Sabbath would also be lost if it became like just another day. The command to honor the Sabbath was a core topic of Israel's identity. The support for temple worship had many facets. The people pledged their generosity which would provide for the animal sacrifices, wood for the altar flame, and food for the priests, Levites, and their families; all of which would be supplied through the tithe of the people (Verse 37). The tithe probably seemed like a challenging commitment to them just like it does today. The tithe is not only a tenth of everything but also a symbol of the whole. When a tenth is given by anyone, they are essentially showing that they realize all of it is God's and by giving a tithe the person reflects gratitude and allegiance to God as the One who provides it all. The principle of the tithe remains even today as a way to demonstrate one's faith and gratitude to the Lord. How have you understood the tithe?

DAY 14 – Nehemiah 11 & 12

These two chapters are more challenging to read because they are mostly lists of people. It is fascinating to think of these individuals and what they were going through at that time. The lists given represent people who had experienced the favor of God. To me, it would be an incredible privilege to live in Jerusalem. My trip to the Holy Land in 2016 was fantastic but the best part was visiting Jerusalem. I felt completely inspired and full of worship in my heart. Only a tenth of the people were chosen to live in the Holy City. But the part of this reading that I thought about most is the celebration of the new wall surrounding Jerusalem. It was a joyous occasion with music, singing, and gratitude so the "people of Jerusalem could be heard far away." (12:43) I noticed this statement: "The custom of having choir directors to lead the choirs in hymns of praise and thanksgiving to God began long ago in the days of David and Asaph." (V46) David lived 500 years before Nehemiah so the importance of song and worship was well established as pleasing to God. The Book of Psalms is known as the Worship Book of the Israelites. Today I was reading Ephesians 5 which points to being filled with the Spirit. The next verse after 5:18 says "singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, and making music to the Lord in your hearts." (Ephesians 5:19) Sometimes I watch "America's Got Talent." So often there are these amazing choirs who sing and dance for joy. I take pleasure in the truth that joyful singing and making music originated with God's people. Keep up the worship; remember to celebrate!

DAY 15 – Nehemiah 13

As you are reading this chapter you might not realize that Nehemiah isn't in Jerusalem at this time. But verse 6 reveals that fact. After 12 years of leading the people as governor, Nehemiah returns to Babylon. His leadership was very crucial to the stability of the city. It didn't take long for people to go "sideways." Godly leadership is an essential part of God's plan and Nehemiah would return within a year or two. The characters of the Bible we remember the most are often the people who set the example and lead others to live it. What would you call what Nehemiah did in this chapter? I would call it "tough love." The Sabbath practices and the intermarriages had to be confronted. The people quickly returned to familiar sins after Nehemiah was gone. Nehemiah's leadership, upon his return, was forthright, uncovering the problem, correcting the problem, and asking God to renew his blessing as the people repent. In verse 22 I would suggest that Nehemiah felt some pressure from the people concerning his challenging reforms for Sabbath practices. He prayed, "Remember this good deed, O my God! Have compassion on me according to your great and unfailing love." As if to say, "I did this for You, Lord; please have my back." Nehemiah was a courageous man who gave us a marvelous example of leading others with tender and tough love. What do you take away from the last two weeks of reading from Nehemiah?

WEEK 4

After reading six chapters of Esther before I could put it down, I realized that it would be best to read at least two chapters a day which moves us through the Book in one week. Esther is a powerful story that has inspired the writing of novels, the production of movies, and courage in women, to name a few. You are probably familiar with this story but I am sure you will be captured again by this rags-to-riches drama.

One purpose of this book in Hebrew history is to explain Purim. Purim became an annual remembrance of how God delivered his people from death (9:20-22). More than that, the author of Esther wanted his readers to see the mystery of God's hand in history. He shows the relationship between human decision and action that proves to be instrumental to the divine purpose of God. Your reading will illuminate these truths and more. This is sure to be a week of inspiration in God's Word.

DAY 16 – Esther 1 & 2

If you are like me, I feel sorry for Queen Vashti. It seems to me that there could have been some discussion on what was going on and why Vashti didn't attend the male-exclusive banquet at the King's whim. Both testosterone and drunkenness fuel the impetuous decision to banish the Queen. This obviously pulls us into the story and it serves at least two purposes: First, the environment for women in that day was especially cruel and placed women under the thumb of men. The author wanted us to realize that Esther will have little power to usurp her desires. Secondly, what would be the backdrop for Esther's arrival? The King, with the advice of his attendants, wanted to replace the Queen who would become his primary wife. The elevating of Esther is intriguing as she is from the exiled Jews and an unlikely candidate because of it. Even though the Book of Esther follows Ezra and Nehemiah, her story actually takes place before Ezra and Nehemiah come on the scene. 50,000 Jews returned to Jerusalem 50 years before Esther but the majority of Jews continued to live in Persia. So too, for Mordecai and his family (2:5f). The challenge of succeeding as a Jew in that culture caused Mordecai to advise Esther to keep her nationality a secret. Even though God is not specifically mentioned in the story, you will notice his influence throughout. Why would Hegai, the man in charge of the King's harem, show special favor to Esther? It says he thought she was beautiful but another fact is that Hegai was a eunuch, so his interests had to be moved by God, in my opinion. Twelve months later the King chooses Esther and everything is hunky-dory until our reading tomorrow. The chapter closes with a noble act recorded as Mordecai warns the King of an assassination plot which is proven to be true. This seems like an isolated incident but it will be an important piece in the puzzle of God's intervention to save his people. If you are like me, you are inclined to read on. But I assure you that if you wait, it will be worth the wait. Is there anything in these two chapters that strengthens your faith? How so?

DAY 17 – Esther 3 & 4

These two chapters bring the reason for the Book to light. We immediately dislike Haman because of his arrogance and lack of regard for human life. It is also surprising to us that the King would even go along with something so devilish. But the culture and environment of the Old Testament surprises us every time we read, right? Haman was filled with rage (3:5) which doubles his ethnic hatred that already

existed. As appalling as this scenario appears to us, a similar craze arose in the 1930s of modern history with a plan to annihilate the Jews as well. Human pride may never be tamed until the judgment. But the interaction between Mordecai and his adopted daughter, Esther is the crux of the story. The monumental statement from Mordecai lives on in power for us still today: “If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance and relief for the Jews will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die. Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this?” (4:14) The remaining three verses are essentially saying that they, Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews, are praying for God’s intervention as they fast for three days. Esther puts the situation in God’s hands and pledges that she will even die for her people. You already know the risk of presenting yourself to the King and him becoming upset. It could mean an even quicker death for her and the Jewish people. This stirring part of the story has us on the edge of our seats. What will happen? If you are like me, I couldn’t wait even though I already know the story, I read the next two chapters right away. However, my thoughts about those chapters will have to wait until tomorrow. Try to put yourself in Esther’s shoes. Like Esther, you have a divine purpose. God has orchestrated your life so that you might honor him and bless others in a way that no one else can. How might you summarize your God-given purpose?

DAY 18 – Esther 5 & 6

These chapters slow down the pace of the story for me. Esther is very cautiously deliberate. It was customary protocol to not appear anxious about asking for a favor or negotiating an agreement. But after one banquet Esther asks the King to attend another. She showed incredible patience and consistent courage every step of the way. The situation was especially urgent but then again, she had to trust God that justice would prevail. Two more clarifying events take place with Haman building a pole of execution for Mordecai and the King being restless one night and reading the historical record of Mordecai exposing the plot to assassinate him. God was at work behind the scenes, as he always is, to protect Esther and Mordecai, his children. The execution pole will be used but not for Mordecai and the timing of discovery for the King to realize Mordecai’s noble concern for the King’s life was nothing short of providential. As we have seen in this story numerous times, God’s hand is evident, too at this crucial juncture for the Jews. The unfolding of the Book of Esther is a real page-turner so I won’t be surprised to hear you say you read the whole Book in two or three days, just like me. But let’s slow down and contemplate the invisible hand of God in these two chapters. How does the divine orchestration of these events inspire you? How might this apply to your life?

DAY 19 – Esther 7 & 8

If the story had been moving slowly, that is no longer the case in this chapter. Haman is gone before you know it. Haman showed no regard for the value of human life and neither would he be shown any concern about ending his life just like that. This swift turnaround demonstrates God’s ability to move quickly and to bring justice to those who were being treated unfairly. One day the Jews anticipate annihilation and the next day the decree rapidly spreads throughout the land that the Jews are to be protected and even honored along with their first citizen, Mordecai who becomes their hero. “And the people of Suza celebrated the new decree.” (8:15) I would expect the Jews to be happy and celebrate but the whole city is an interesting aspect of this turnaround. Since Mordecai was known as a Jew and since Haman most likely didn’t have the greatest reputation, they understood the injustice of Haman’s original

decree. The city had been in confusion over such an outlandish law that would eliminate all the Jews. I am sure many people in Suza developed friendships with Jews in their neighborhoods and workplaces. But as you will learn in the next chapter, there were a great number of people who hated the Jews. Ethnic hatred is difficult to understand since God has demonstrated his love for all peoples and every race. To behave differently would be contrary to God's will. God's blessing on the Jews was actually used in another marvelous way; people embraced the Jewish understanding of life and belief in God as this chapter ends. "Many of the people of the land became Jews themselves, for they feared what the Jews might do to them." (8:17) As Esther's story slowly unfolds, we wonder if she and her people are doomed. Maybe her outcome would be similar to Queen Vashti in Chapter 1. And for 6 chapters, we fear the worst. This is a lesson to us that God is aware of every detail and nothing takes him by surprise. He can move swiftly and show his strength or he can delay to deepen our need to learn to persevere. God always has a purpose in mind and he can always be trusted. How do you understand this speedy intervention by God? In what way do you need the Lord to intervene? In what ways might God be calling you to be patient?

DAY 20 – Esther 9 & 10

From chapter 8 we read, "But remember that whatever has already been written in the king's name and sealed with his signet ring can never be revoked." (8:8) Only a new decree could be given that would give different and competing directions. This seems unusual and cumbersome but it was the law of the land. So, this meant that the enemies of the Jews could still attack and kill Jews which brings us to our reading today. The nature of the conflict was reduced to only those who displayed hatred and a stance to harm the Jews. The Jews were empowered to defend themselves and did so valiantly. The King had given them permission to take plunder from their enemies but the Jews refused to do so. (9:10, 15) This event established the festival of "Purim." Purim was how the original date was chosen and it landed on March 7th, a year later. The practice of "Purim" was connected to casting lots. One year (literally, 11 months until the annihilation of Jews) definitely helped Esther and Mordecai pray and plan as well as giving the hand of God time to intervene in such a miraculous way. The celebration of Purim is still practiced today. Jewish people fast and pray to commemorate Esther's fasting. This fast is then followed by Purim, which is celebrated at the same time every year. On this joyous holiday, they read Esther (with loud boos for Haman and hoorays for Mordecai) and have a time of feasting and rejoicing, with gifts for friends and for the poor. It is a celebration of how God providentially worked to care for his people so that they were not exterminated and of how God continues to care for, provide for, and save his people. This story inspires me every time I read through it. What are you remembering from our readings of Esther this week?