



LIBERATING
FAITH STUDIES

***GOD FREES
AND REDEEMS***

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The Order of Service

- I. Bell tap or organ voluntary
as a signal for silence
 - II. Singing
 - III. The Apostles' Creed
 - IV. Prayer, closing with the
Lord's Prayer in concert
 - V. Singing
 - VI. Calling roll of officers and teachers
 - VII. Responsive reading
of the lesson text by school
 - VIII. The Decalogue
-

The Lesson

- I. Organ interlude while
the classes are being arranged
 - II. Class study of the lesson
 - III. Warning bell — 5 minutes
 - IV. Closing bell — silence
-

The Closing

- I. Singing
- II. Review and application
of the lesson
- III. Secretary's report
- IV. The Church School Creed
- V. Singing
- VI. Benediction

Editorial Staff

Publisher • Rev. Dr. Roderick D. Belin

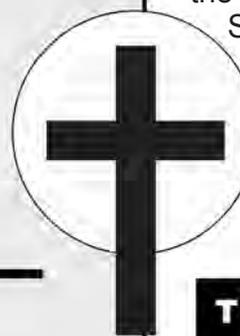
Editor • Rev. Dr. Garland F. Pierce

— Lessons —

Rev. Dr. D. Melynda Clarke

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; the third day He arose from the dead, He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Church Universal, the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.



The Church School Creed

I believe my A.M.E. Church School must grow and grow; and that I must make it a top priority to make it so. Every member a Christian, every Christian a worker, every worker trained so that a worker need not be ashamed. This we ask in Jesus' name.

A.M.E. Discipline

Hello, AME Church School Member!

The Home Daily Bible Readings will continue to appear at the end of each Sunday's lesson but they will be the readings for the following week. We made this change in response to your requests. The readings for the first week are on the following page.

This Sunday will highlight the vital work of the Church School and recognize the excellent work of Church School students and leaders. Please visit our website- www.iamame.org- for ideas to observe AME Church School Sunday and to find other worship and study resources to empower you and enhance the life of the church.

For over a year we have used Zoom and Facebook to facilitate our weekly Connectional Church School with teachers (lay and clergy) from around the AME Connection. They generously share their knowledge, talents, and expertise with a weekly average of 500 participants viewing via Zoom and 1500 on Facebook.

This virtual AME Connectional Church School was birthed due to the limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The blessings from the teachings have been immeasurable. We will continue this Connectional Church School on Sundays at 9:00 a.m. EST. Join us! Zoom Meeting ID: 829 9325 1894.

Visit our website- www.iamame.org- to find worship and study resources to empower you and enhance the life of the church.

Like our Facebook page so you will be informed about programming and important announcements from the Publishing House and *The Christian Recorder*: www.facebook.com/amecpublishing.

Join our Facebook Group to continue conversations after Church School and share ideas, thoughts, and best practices with other AME Church School members and teachers: www.facebook.com/groups/amechurchschool.

Thank you for purchasing *Liberating Faith Studies*. We are working every day to fulfill our mission to provide high quality resources to empower us to spread Jesus Christ's liberating gospel, pursue justice, and enhance the social development of all people.

And, always remember, I am praying for you.

Roderick D. Belin
President/Publisher

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

February 28–March 6

Monday	Isaiah 40:1-11 (Prepare the Way of the Lord)
Tuesday	Isaiah 45:1-10 (Being God’s Instrument)
Wednesday	Philippians 4:10-19 (God Will Provide for Every Need)
Thursday	Isaiah 40:12-15, 21-31 (Lift Up Your Eyes to God)
Friday	1 Peter 2:13-17 (Live Freely but Responsibly)
Saturday	Psalms 97 (Light Dawns for the Righteous)
Sunday	Ezra 1:1-8, 11; 2:64-70 (Cyrus Permits Jews to Return Home)

Babylonian Captivity Ends

Lesson Scripture: Ezra 1; 2:64-70

Focus Scripture: Ezra 1:1-8, 11; 2:64-70

Key Verse: As soon as they came to the house of the Lord in Jerusalem, some of the heads of families made freewill offerings for the house of God, to erect it on its site. Ezra 2:68 (NRSV)

EZRA 1:1-8, 11; 2:64-70 (NRSV)

Ezra 1:1-8

1 In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom, and also in a written edict declared:

2 “Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah.

3 Any of those among you who are of his people—may their God be with them!—are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem;

4 and let all survivors, in whatever place they reside, be assisted by the people of their place with silver and gold, with goods and with animals, besides freewill offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem.”

5 The heads of the families of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites—everyone whose spirit God had stirred—got ready to go up and rebuild the house of the Lord in Jerusalem.

6 All their neighbors aided them with silver vessels, with gold, with goods, with animals, and with valuable gifts, besides all that was freely offered.

7 King Cyrus himself brought out the vessels of the house of the Lord that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods.

8 King Cyrus of Persia had them released

EZRA 1:1-8, 11; 2:64-70 (KJV)

Ezra 1:1-8

1 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying,

2 Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

3 Who is there among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel, (he is the God,) which is in Jerusalem.

4 And whosoever remaineth in any place where he sojourneth, let the men of his place help him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, beside the freewill offering for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.

5 Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem.

6 And all they that were about them strengthened their hands with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, and with beasts, and with precious things, beside all that was willingly offered.

7 Also Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of Jerusalem, and had put them in the house of his gods;

8 Even those did Cyrus king of Persia bring

into the charge of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah.

11

11 ... the total of the gold and silver vessels was five thousand four hundred. All these Sheshbazzar brought up, when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem.

2:64-70

64 The whole assembly together was forty-two thousand three hundred sixty,

65 besides their male and female servants, of whom there were seven thousand three hundred thirty-seven; and they had two hundred male and female singers.

66 They had seven hundred thirty-six horses, two hundred forty-five mules,

67 four hundred thirty-five camels, and six thousand seven hundred twenty donkeys.

68 As soon as they came to the house of the Lord in Jerusalem, some of the heads of families made freewill offerings for the house of God, to erect it on its site.

69 According to their resources they gave to the building fund sixty-one thousand darics of gold, five thousand minas of silver, and one hundred priestly robes.

70 The priests, the Levites, and some of the people lived in Jerusalem and its vicinity; and the singers, the gatekeepers, and the temple servants lived in their towns, and all Israel in their towns.

forth by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and numbered them unto Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah.

11

11 All the vessels of gold and of silver were five thousand and four hundred. All these did Sheshbazzar bring up with them of the captivity that were brought up from Babylon unto Jerusalem.

2:64-70

64 The whole congregation together was forty and two thousand three hundred and threescore,

65 Beside their servants and their maids, of whom there were seven thousand three hundred thirty and seven: and there were among them two hundred singing men and singing women.

66 Their horses were seven hundred thirty and six; their mules, two hundred forty and five;

67 Their camels, four hundred thirty and five; their asses, six thousand seven hundred and twenty.

68 And some of the chief of the fathers, when they came to the house of the Lord which is at Jerusalem, offered freely for the house of God to set it up in his place:

69 They gave after their ability unto the treasure of the work threescore and one thousand drams of gold, and five thousand pound of silver, and one hundred priests' garments.

70 So the priests, and the Levites, and some of the people, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinims, dwelt in their cities, and all Israel in their cities.

KEY TERM

- **Priesthood** – One especially consecrated to the service of a divinity and through whom worship, prayer, sacrifice, or other service is offered to the object of worship.

INTRODUCTION

The book of Ezra is written by the prophet of the same name. He provides an account of the exiled Jews' return

to their homeland, under the decree of King Cyrus of Persia. Other prophets also present an account of this historic emancipation of the Jewish people. Prophets such as Jeremiah (Jer. 25:11-12; 29:10) predicted not only the fall of the nation of Israel at the hands of tyrannical dictators, but also their return 70 years later. Ezra writes about the fulfillment of these prophecies, but through the eyes of the returning refugees. Being a priest himself, he ensures that future generations

recognize that the Jews' return is not simply an act of human compassion to suffering or a need to promote justice and fairness to these oppressed people. This is not a simple act of man, or a historic event occurring by chance. Instead, Ezra considers the prophetic words of Isaiah and Jeremiah, and affirms the divine manifestation of God's plan. Ezra documents the importance of returning to Yahweh, the one true God, and restoring the purity of the priesthood. He illustrates the responsibility of God's people to invest in rebuilding the temple and restore the holy practices that God originally ordained.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

The first chapter of Ezra opens with a decree being proclaimed by a new emperor. The year is about 638 B.C.E., around the beginning of King Cyrus of Persia's reign over Babylon. As a critical shift in the government's rule over their captives, King Cyrus investigates the cultural background of his subjects and studies the historical records. His findings reveal the harsh, cruel reign of King Nebuchadnezzar, the forced idol worship, and the desecration of the holy temple and objects. King Cyrus respects

the religious beliefs of the Jews, an indication that God has touched his heart and revealed God's divine purpose for the children of Israel. This release from bondage can be compared in some ways to the release of the Israelites held captive in Egypt (Ez. 1:7-8). The king commanded the treasurer, Mithredath, to personally count the articles that Nebuchadnezzar stole from the temple, and ensure they were returned (vs. 7-11). There was no force or coercion by plague, no test of

Ezra considers the prophetic words of Isaiah and Jeremiah, and affirms the divine manifestation of God's plan.

wills. Instead, the pagan ruler recognizes the value of the people of Israel and their beliefs. It is unclear from this text, but historical records indicate that King Cyrus did not attempt to assimilate other cultures into those of Persia. Instead, a practice of willingly offering the captives the ability to maintain their cultural beliefs could possibly promote unity and support of the Persian occupation. What can be observed is the readiness of the

people to invest into the Israelites' return to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of their homeland. As this historical account unfolds, the completion of the Israelites' bondage is at hand. As the Israelites return to Judah, a brief census is taken in chapter

two. There is an apparent intentionality to detail not only the number of people returning, but their specific lineage, skills, and abilities. Ezra illustrates the number of priests and Levites who were present and accounted for. This indicates the importance of those responsible for restoring not only the physical building, but the revitalization of the sanctity of worship. As the people return, Ezra presents a glorious celebration and creates a spirit of hope in the restoration of their people and reconciliation with their God.

SANKOFA

There is an African proverb that says, "He who burns down his house knows why ashes cost a fortune." There is an invaluable lesson to be learned when one considers their role in the destruction of the things and people they hold dear. In the not-so-distant past, there was an alarming number of house fires that resulted from people smoking in bed. The loss of property was small compared to the painful tragedy of loss of life that often accompanied this habit. Other habits and lifestyle choices can also result in painful consequences. Decisions such as drinking and driving and even texting

and driving are risks to oneself and the people around them. These warnings are routinely shared, not only in media, but in households around the world, as parents tell their children not to make these fatal mistakes. There is a cost to failing to heed these warnings in life; a cost that no one wants to pay. However, there are ways to rebuild. The process can be long and expensive. It often feels more costly when the damages incurred and the associated needed repairs occur from one's own negligence or misguided behavior. Yet, in rebuilding, one can better understand the value in what is being built. It is not based simply on the materials that are used. There is a personal investment, a restoration of community. When considering the Jews' return to Jerusalem, it required more than the

government to invest in their restoration project. It also required their ability to see hope in the rubble. They understood the value of what they had lost. So it is with many who have faced great loss. The realization in what once existed can also be the inspiration to motivate others to restore the beauty of the past.

...Ezra presents a glorious celebration and creates a spirit of hope in the restoration of their people and reconciliation with their God.

CASE STUDY

is free and must be dealt with as such.”

Today, we commonly use the phrase “40 acres and a mule,” but few of us have read the order itself. Three of its parts are relevant here. Section one bears repeating in full: “The islands from Charleston, south, the abandoned rice fields along the rivers for thirty miles back from the sea, and the country bordering the St. Johns river, Florida, are reserved and set apart for the settlement of the negroes [sic] now made free by the acts of war and the proclamation of the President of the United States.”

Section two of the federal order stated that this land would be set aside specifically for these new communities, and it would be governed entirely by black people themselves.

“... on the islands, and in the settlements hereafter to be established, no white person whatever, unless military officers and soldiers detailed for duty, will be permitted to reside; and the sole and exclusive management of affairs will be left to the freed people themselves ... By the laws of war, and orders of the President of the United States, the negro [sic]

Section three specified the allocation of land: “... each family shall have a plot of not more than (40) acres of tillable ground, and when it borders on some water channel, with not more than 800 feet water front, in the possession of which land the military authorities will afford them protection, until such time as they can protect themselves, or until

Congress shall regulate their title.”

With this Order, 400,000 acres of land – “a strip of coastline stretching from Charleston, South Carolina, to the St. John’s River in Florida, including Georgia’s Sea Islands and the mainland thirty miles in from the coast” would be redistributed to the newly freed slaves. The extent of this order and

its larger implications are mind-boggling, actually.

Radical Republicans had been actively advocating land redistribution “to break the back of Southern slaveholders’ power,” as Myers observed. But Sherman’s plan only took shape after the meeting that he and Stanton held with those black ministers, at 8:00 p.m.,

“Radical Republicans had been actively advocating land redistribution “to break the back of Southern slaveholders’ power,” as Myers observed.”

Jan. 12, on the second floor of Charles Green's mansion on Savannah's Macon Street. In its broadest strokes, "40 acres and a mule" was their idea.

The question is frequently asked, "Whatever became of this visionary program?" It is assumed by many that this would have fundamentally altered the course of American race relations. Unfortunately, after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Johnson, Lincoln's successor, and a sympathizer with the south, overturned the order in the fall of 1865. The land along the South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida coasts was returned to the planters who had originally owned it; to the very people who had declared war on the United States of America.

LIFE APPLICATION

There may come a time in life when things seem to simply fall apart. For the Jewish people, the invasion of Babylonian raiders, and the destruction of their cities, homes, and temple, along with their captivity, was their worst nightmare. However, God promised that God would restore what was taken from them. God promised that God would be with them, despite their

own disobedience. The time eventually came when that promise was fulfilled. Today, God's people have the same promise through Jesus Christ. It is not the destruction of a physical temple that is at stake. Instead, every person will lose their physical bodies to death one day. However, every believer in Jesus Christ has the promise of resurrection and eternal life. The earthly body is replaced with a new one. And while each person

waits, there is also the promise of God's Holy Spirit living in all of us. The greatest form of restoration and liberation is through Jesus Christ.

QUESTIONS

1. The rising trend of gentrification in urban cities has caused great despair in the African American community. How can African Americans regain ownership of these valuable plots of land and capital? What can be done to avoid the continued decline of African American home ownership, particularly in areas of growing metropolitan growth?
2. Many AME churches throughout the world need restoration and repair. However, there is a growing decline

“God promised that God would be with them, despite their own disobedience. The time eventually came when that promise was fulfilled.”

in church attendance, as well as a movement towards alternative worship venues. What are some options for these local churches to consider?

faithfulness in our lives and every moment in time you have provided for us. There is no mountain too high or valley too low to prevent the outcome of your divine plan. Strengthen us in our journey and reinforce our faith with your presence, your love, and your power. These things we ask in the precious name of our Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

Closing Hymn or Song of Praise: “I Don’t Know About Tomorrow” – AME Hymnal #446

Closing Prayer: Dear Lord, we thank you for today. We are grateful for your

Written by: Rev. Dr. D. Melynda Clarke

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

March 7-March 13

Monday	Ezra 3:8-13 (Rebuilding the Temple and Praising God)
Tuesday	Ezra 4:1-5 (Jews Discouraged from Rebuilding)
Wednesday	Revelation 5 (Worship in the Heavenly Sanctuary)
Thursday	Psalm 138 (Bowing in Thanksgiving)
Friday	Haggai 1 (The Time to Rebuild Has Come)
Saturday	Haggai 2:1-9, 15-19 (The Temple’s Foundation Laid)
Sunday	Ezra 6:1-12 (God Provides through King Darius)

FREEDOM TO WORSHIP

Lesson Scripture: Ezra 5; 6:1-12; 10:1-5

Focus Scripture: Ezra 6:1-12

Key Verse: "May the God who has established his name there overthrow any king or people that shall put forth a hand to alter this, or to destroy this house of God in Jerusalem."

Ezra 6:12a (NRSV)

EZRA 6:1-12 (NRSV)

1 Then King Darius made a decree, and they searched the archives where the documents were stored in Babylon.

2 But it was in Ecbatana, the capital in the province of Media, that a scroll was found on which this was written: "A record.

3 In the first year of his reign, King Cyrus issued a decree: Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the house be rebuilt, the place where sacrifices are offered and burnt offerings are brought; its height shall be sixty cubits and its width sixty cubits,

4 with three courses of hewn stones and one course of timber; let the cost be paid from the royal treasury.

5 Moreover, let the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the temple in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be restored and brought back to the temple in Jerusalem, each to its place; you shall put them in the house of God.

6 Now you, Tattenai, governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and you, their associates, the envoys in the province Beyond the River, keep away;

7 let the work on this house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its site.

8 Moreover I make a decree regarding what you shall do for these elders of the Jews for the rebuilding of this house of God: the cost is to be paid to these people, in full and without delay, from the royal revenue, the tribute of the

EZRA 6:1-12 (KJV)

1 Then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in the house of the rolls, where the treasures were laid up in Babylon.

2 And there was found at Achmetha, in the palace that is in the province of the Medes, a roll, and therein was a record thus written:

3 In the first year of Cyrus the king the same Cyrus the king made a decree concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, Let the house be builded, the place where they offered sacrifices, and let the foundations thereof be strongly laid; the height thereof threescore cubits, and the breadth thereof threescore cubits;

4 With three rows of great stones, and a row of new timber: and let the expenses be given out of the king's house:

5 And also let the golden and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took forth out of the temple which is at Jerusalem, and brought unto Babylon, be restored, and brought again unto the temple which is at Jerusalem, every one to his place, and place them in the house of God.

6 Now therefore, Tatnai, governor beyond the river, Shetharboznai, and your companions the Apharsachites, which are beyond the river, be ye far from thence:

7 Let the work of this house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews build this house of God in his place.

8 Moreover I make a decree what ye shall do to the elders of these Jews for the building of this house of God: that of the king's goods, even of the tribute beyond the river, forthwith expenses be given unto these men, that they be

province Beyond the River.

9 Whatever is needed—young bulls, rams, or sheep for burnt offerings to the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, or oil, as the priests in Jerusalem require—let that be given to them day by day without fail,

10 so that they may offer pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king and his children.

11 Furthermore I decree that if anyone alters this edict, a beam shall be pulled out of the house of the perpetrator, who then shall be impaled on it. The house shall be made a dunghill.

12 May the God who has established his name there overthrow any king or people that shall put forth a hand to alter this, or to destroy this house of God in Jerusalem. I, Darius, make a decree; let it be done with all diligence.”

not hindered.

9 And that which they have need of, both young bullocks, and rams, and lambs, for the burnt offerings of the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, and oil, according to the appointment of the priests which are at Jerusalem, let it be given them day by day without fail:

10 That they may offer sacrifices of sweet savours unto the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king, and of his sons.

11 Also I have made a decree, that whosoever shall alter this word, let timber be pulled down from his house, and being set up, let him be hanged thereon; and let his house be made a dunghill for this.

12 And the God that hath caused his name to dwell there destroy all kings and people, that shall put to their hand to alter and to destroy this house of God which is at Jerusalem. I Darius have made a decree; let it be done with speed.

KEY TERMS

- **Archives** – A part of the royal treasure-house (5:17), in which important state documents were kept.
- **Impale** – Pierce or transfix with a sharp instrument. Kill by fixing on a sharp stake.

INTRODUCTION

Ezra’s report of the return of the exiles continues to unfold the internal drama and strife between the returning Jews and those who oppose their return. Those who resettled in the land attempted to begin rebuilding the temple, but not without opposition (Ezra 4:1-23; 5:1-17). During this time King Cyrus no longer reigns over the Persian Empire. Those who disagree with the progressive plans of the Jews have allied with others

in power. But other prophets foretold these challenges and encouraged God’s people to continue their vision (Haggai 1; Zech. 1). As a result, a letter was sent to the new ruler, King Darius, to recognize the plan set forth by his predecessor, King Cyrus. After investigating the chronicles written prior to his reign, King Darius confirmed that the rebuilding of the Jewish temple was in fact decreed by the previous king of Persia. Despite the enemies’ attempts to sabotage the vision, the work continued.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

In this chapter, we find a new ruler of Persia, King Darius. Do not confuse him with Darius the Mede in the fifth chapter of Daniel. Darius is now reigning over Persia, during the time the Jews are settling back into their homeland. The sacred

project to rebuild their temple faces some opposition. This new king has the dilemma of determining if accusations against the Jews are true. Opposers attack the Jews' efforts to rebuild by falsely claiming their intention to ultimately rebuild their nation and revolt against the Persian king.

King Darius wisely sends his leaders to research the historical records to determine the origin of this culture and their recent return to their homeland. His orders result in accurately revealing his predecessor's decree to honor the Jewish people and not only return them to their homeland but equip them with the necessary resources to restore their community. The king reveals his confidence in his leadership and the nation's strength while also recognizing the advantages of enabling other cultures to embrace their heritage. Ezra ensures that this historical record documents the purpose for rebuilding the city was to restore the temple worship. King Darius decrees not only the restoration of the temple but acknowledges the true God of Israel. Anyone who opposes this edict would find severe consequences, as was the

practice in those ancient times.

SANKOFA

"When a head is too big, it cannot avoid punches." – African Proverb

Whenever someone establishes a goal for themselves, someone else will try to discourage, devalue, or even sabotage that person's plans. The idea of having goals and aspirations above others is intimidating to those who do not dare to try. The danger of having these types of people around is that they are detrimental to others who have ambition. Having confidence and faith is not a sign of pride but can be an indication of faith. Yet, those who do not understand or fail to take the risk of going farther will often see others as a threat.

“
King Darius decrees
not only the restoration
of the temple but
acknowledges the true
God of Israel.”

An old saying suggests that ambitious people have “a big head.” Those who are brilliant, talented, skilled, creative, and have other blessings are often considered a challenge to those who wish to remain stuck in the status quo. So those who strive to achieve more, will take the harmful attacks of others. It is like the African proverb; maybe this saying was intended for those with a prideful spirit.

But even without the arrogance, anyone who has ambition will ultimately take a few punches. The lesson to be learned is not to diminish yourself to accommodate those unwilling to try or seek a higher calling. Take the punch and continue to think big anyway.

CASE STUDY

Henry McNeal Turner was born on February 1, 1834, in Newberry, South Carolina. His family history reflected the oppressive slave laws that existed during his time. The state of South Carolina forbade blacks to learn to read or write. However, Henry obtained what was considered an illegal education from lawyers who lived in the state. He eventually was licensed to preach in 1858 and moved his family to St. Louis, Missouri, in attempts to flee from being kidnapped and sold into slavery through the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. When the Civil War was declared, he recruited one of the first black regiments and became the first black to be commissioned an officer as chaplain of First U.S. Colored Troops.

After the war, he relocated to Macon, Georgia, where he served in the State Assembly. He continued to preach and is credited with growing the AME Church in the south, increasing membership by over 400,000. As whites in the south began to regain power and establish Jim Crow laws, Turner advocated for black nationalism and supported *Back to Africa* movements. He was a fierce man of God who sought to seek justice through the law and the word of God.

... anyone who has ambition will ultimately take a few punches. The lesson to be learned is not to diminish yourself to accommodate those unwilling to try or seek a higher calling. Take the punch and continue to think big anyway.

LIFE APPLICATION

One of the most famous plots found in movies, TV series, and even current reality TV shows are scenarios surrounding the conflict between families, businesses, and political leaders. But real-life competition between rivals can be far more intriguing. The Bible gives us many examples of how these conflicts can destroy families and thwart dreams, but God's plan will always come to pass. The same can be said in our lives. You may be confronted with numerous obstacles and opponents. However, the will of God will always prevail. Do not be discouraged by those

who fail to see your purpose and God’s plan in your life. Instead, continue to move forward in the direction God has revealed to you. The most important freedom is the freedom to dream. Never lose sight of the dreams and goals that God has set before you. Finally, be supportive of others and their goals. Everyone has the right to dream big.

QUESTIONS

1. Consider the success of your church and/or ministry, not simply based on size and numbers, but the impact on your community. Discuss the possibilities of growth and development. Be prayerful and ask God for further clarity for the future.

2. What are possible opportunities to engage new people into joining ministry projects and programs?

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

Closing Hymn or Song of Praise: “He Has Done Great Things for Me” – African American Heritage Hymnal #507

Closing Prayer: God, it’s us. We come knowing that all you ask us to do is be faithful and available. That’s all we need to know to renew our faith walk. The evidence will be carrying out your will, not ours. Enough said! Amen.

Written by: Jacquelyn Dupont Walker

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

March 14-March 20

Monday	Leviticus 23:4-8 (Keep Holy Convocations)
Tuesday	Exodus 12:1-14 (God Institutes the Passover)
Wednesday	Exodus 12:21-28, 50-51 (Moses’ Instructions About the Passover)
Thursday	Psalms 113 (Praise the Name of the Lord)
Friday	1 Corinthians 5:7-8; 10:1-4 (Christ Our Passover)
Saturday	Psalms 114 (Praise for God’s Liberation from Egypt)
Sunday	Ezra 6:13-22 (Returned Exiles Keep the Passover)

CELEBRATE PASSOVER LIBERATION

Lesson Scripture: Ezra 6:13-22; Leviticus 23:4-8

Focus Scripture: Ezra 6:13-22

Key Verse: The people of Israel, the priests and the Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy. Ezra 6:16 (NRSV)

EZRA 6:13-22 (NRSV)

13 Then, according to the word sent by King Darius, Tattenai, the governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their associates did with all diligence what King Darius had ordered.

14 So the elders of the Jews built and prospered, through the prophesying of the prophet Haggai and Zechariah son of Iddo. They finished their building by command of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus, Darius, and King Artaxerxes of Persia;

15 and this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius.

16 The people of Israel, the priests and the Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy.

17 They offered at the dedication of this house of God one hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs, and as a sin offering for all Israel, twelve male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel.

18 Then they set the priests in their divisions and the Levites in their courses for the service of God at Jerusalem, as it is written in the book of Moses.

19 On the fourteenth day of the first month the returned exiles kept the passover.

20 For both the priests and the Levites had purified themselves; all of them were clean. So they killed the passover lamb for all the returned exiles, for their fellow priests, and for themselves.

21 It was eaten by the people of Israel who

EZRA 6:13-22 (KJV)

13 Then Tatnai, governor on this side the river, Shetharboznai, and their companions, according to that which Darius the king had sent, so they did speedily.

14 And the elders of the Jews builded, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they builded, and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the commandment of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia.

15 And this house was finished on the third day of the month Adar, which was in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king.

16 And the children of Israel, the priests, and the Levites, and the rest of the children of the captivity, kept the dedication of this house of God with joy.

17 And offered at the dedication of this house of God an hundred bullocks, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs; and for a sin offering for all Israel, twelve he goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel.

18 And they set the priests in their divisions, and the Levites in their courses, for the service of God, which is at Jerusalem; as it is written in the book of Moses.

19 And the children of the captivity kept the passover upon the fourteenth day of the first month.

20 For the priests and the Levites were purified together, all of them were pure, and killed the passover for all the children of the captivity, and for their brethren the priests, and for themselves.

had returned from exile, and also by all who had joined them and separated themselves from the pollutions of the nations of the land to worship the Lord, the God of Israel.

22 With joy they celebrated the festival of unleavened bread seven days; for the Lord had made them joyful, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work on the house of God, the God of Israel.

21 And the children of Israel, which were come again out of captivity, and all such as had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the Lord God of Israel, did eat,

22 And kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy: for the Lord had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria unto them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

KEY TERMS

- **Purified** – Refers to a certain rite in the external worship of God. Purification seeks to remove legal uncleanness so that the purified individual may resume normal activity in society. Found chiefly in the section of the priestly code known as the Laws of Purity (Lev. 11–16).
- **Ceremonially Clean** – Having a physical or moral blemish to make impure according to the laws, especially the dietary or ceremonial laws; shave all the hair from their heads, including the hair of the beard and eyebrows. They must also wash their clothes and bathe themselves in water (Lev. 14:8-9).

INTRODUCTION

Ezra's writings draw readers into the victorious achievement of the temple restoration. The prophet leaves no stone unturned as he acknowledges the affirmation and commands of three Persian kings who engaged in this final accomplishment; the record is thoughtful and meticulous. The chapter illustrates

the divine plan of God realized gloriously. Ezra ensures readers understand the importance of the completion of the temple and proper temple worship. He identifies the priestly line and the act of purification that enables them to be ceremonially clean, a condition necessary to observe the Levitical law. As indicated in previous chapters, the golden vessels previously stolen from the temple during the Babylonian invasion were returned and replaced and repositioned in the temple. The book of Ezra provides the storyline of how resolute hope overcomes the oppressive conditions the Jews once experienced. In addition, it illustrates the significance of God's prophets and their reminder of obedience. Ezra ensures a clear message that God's people must continue to observe the religious practices of worship and only worship the one true God.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

Ezra's chronicles continue with the Persian governor, Tattenai, who governed the region beyond the Shethar-Boznai River. Accompanied by other royal officers, they carried out the demands of

the king. The result was the successful completion of the temple. The completion aligned with the prophet Haggai and Zechariah of a renewed kingdom. Although the temple's completion was significant, the return to temple worship was the most significant source of joy. Ezra chronicles the return of the priests, emphasizing the restoration of sacrifice, and the Levites, which illustrates the elaborate focus on worship and praise. Ezra revels in the liberation and return of the remaining descendants of the captivity. The scrolls are intentional in highlighting the celebration and the dedication of this significant milestone in Jewish history. Ezra notes they are blessed with the restoration of worship and the return of the artifacts from the temple. The significance that the people experience prosperity is a sign of the return of the Lord's favor towards his people.

SANKOFA

"Once you carry your own water, you will learn the value of every drop." – African Proverb

It is human nature to fail to understand

the value of precious commodities unless one has personally invested time to work for them. The same goes for everyday essential items such as food, clothing, and water. Most Americans enjoy widely accessible clean water. In many countries, water is only available through natural streams or wells. When residents of these areas need water, they routinely walk for miles with buckets to obtain the water needed for drinking, cooking, and washing. Their journey to the well is necessary to sustain their families. Therefore, it is heartbreaking to see one drop of water lost on their return trip home. The Jews who returned to rebuild the temple must have felt a sense of pride and accomplishment once they completed their goals. However, the critics failed to recognize the importance of their work in restoring a place

of worship for their people. They did not carry the water, so to speak, and failed to recognize the value of each brick that was laid to rebuild not just a structure, but their broken past. The same can be said each time families rebuild their homes after destructive acts by nature or man. Those who carry the water, recognize the value of every drop.



The significance that the people experience prosperity is a sign of the return of the Lord's favor towards his people.

CASE STUDY

The Museum of African American History in the USA is more than a building. Manifesting the vision for this museum required numerous attempts. It involved the activism of private citizens and organizations, the passage of federal legislation, the construction of an inspiring new building, and collecting thousands of artifacts. The symbolism of the building itself matches the museum's symbolic presence on the National Mall. Lead designer David Adjaye and lead architect Philip Freelon, together with their architectural team Freelon Adjaye Bond/SmithGroup, won an international competition in April 2009 to design and deliver the museum to the people of the United States. Groundbreaking on the five-acre site took place in February 2012, with the museum's grand opening celebrated on September 24, 2016.

The son of a Ghanaian diplomat, Adjaye grew up as a citizen of the world. He has lived in Egypt, England, Lebanon, and Tanzania and has visited all 54 independent nations of Africa. Freelon is the leading designer for African

American museums today. Before his death in February 2009, J. Max Bond, Jr. designed African American historic sites, museums, and archives globally. As a result, the architects have synthesized various distinctive elements from Africa and the Americas into the building's design and structure.

The museum is not only an American treasure but is also a testimony to the life and legacy of all Americans of African descent. It embodies the historical journey that reflects tragedy and triumph while inspiring future generations to aspire for more.

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LIFE APPLICATION

When watching the Tokyo Summer Olympics in 2021, there were frequent opportunities to see related athletes achieve the high honor of being an Olympian and winning a medal. Athletes' smiles and fits of jubilation were frequently met with tears of joy. But what was especially touching was to see marathon runners cross a finish line after their race. Despite their exhaustion, they were able to wave their flags with pride. Life is very similar to marathons. Life can be full of twists and turns, moments of

exhaustion, pain, and suffering. There are times when many people want to give up. But like a marathon runner, each person attempts to press their way until they reach the finish line. Those who have been to the African American Museum at the Smithsonian will see pictures of many people who ran the race and crossed the finish line. While reflecting on this lesson, take a moment and recognize that you are running the race as well. Your race may be difficult at times, but you are still in the best position to win. You are not competing with anyone else, but simply staying in the race. Attend to every step along the way, so you do not stumble and fall. Read the Bible daily as you replenish yourself throughout the race. Don't stop running for the Lord. You will always win in the end.



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many believers from the traditional in-person fellowships at worship, Bible study, and special worship events. Each church is looking at returning to in-person worship in their own unique way.

1. What are some of the unique ways your church and ministry groups have celebrated your love of Jesus Christ outside the church?
2. How has the alternative uses of virtual services and events informed your ministries?

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

Closing Hymn or Song of Praise: "How Great Is Our God" by Chris Tomlin, Jesse Reeves, and Ed Cash

Closing Prayer: Oh God, help us to trust and praise you more in every season of our lives, especially as we focus on your resurrection. Amen.

QUESTIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic has isolated

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS**March 21-March 27**

Monday	Deuteronomy 8:12-20 (Remember God's Blessings)
Tuesday	James 1:19-27 (Hear and Act)
Wednesday	1 Peter 5:5-9 (Humble Yourselves and Resist the Adversary)
Thursday	Psalms 103:1-10 (Bless the Lord, O My Soul)
Friday	Psalms 103:11-22 (God's Love Is Everlasting)
Saturday	2 Timothy 2:8-13 (Remember Christ and Endure)
Sunday	Deuteronomy 8:1-11 (Keep the Lord's Commandments)