

HELPFUL THOUGHTS

Believing that God is in control is easy when life goes well, but we often find it difficult to believe that God is in control when life is difficult. We can fall into a spirit of confusion and anxiety. Is God punishing us for something? Is God being cruel? Is God even there? We must not trust our own reasoning when these questions creep up. We must turn to the Word of God.

Ezra 9:13 is a difficult confession – because of Israel’s evil deeds and great guilt they were suffering; but it’s a sign of God’s goodness and mercy that God punished them *less* than their sins deserved. They deserved the same fate of all the other nations because they behaved no differently, but God wanted to save them so he disciplined them in order that they would return to him.

In our lives, suffering can take this form, but not always. Sometimes suffering is just suffering because of our fallen world. Not all suffering is punishment. To be sure, God does discipline us, but he does so as a loving Father, in order that we might be saved. Our best encouragement, though, in times of trouble is that God is working all things together for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purposes (Romans 8:28). In the end, the Bible is clear that God is there and God is not cruel but good, and the question of whether God is punishing us doesn’t really matter because if we love him and run to him in times of trouble, that trouble will ultimately work for our good. That’s good news.

ABOUT THE COVER IMAGE

“REBUILD” by Michelle Waters, with help from Robert Tillman and Molly Waters

“In Judah it was said, ‘The strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. There is too much rubble. By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall(...)And (Nehemiah) looked and arose and said(...)’Do not be afraid of (those opposing the work). Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.’(...)Those who carried burdens were loaded in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other. And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built...” - Nehemiah 4:10, 14, 17-18a, ESV

DAILY READING PLAN AND DEVOTIONAL



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FROM CREATION TO THE CROSS

August 17 - 23, 2009

SCRIPTURAL PRAYER

O Lord, I will exalt you. You rescued me from the depths of my sin. You didn't let Satan claim victory over me. Father, I called to you for help and you responded by sending your Son, Jesus, to die the death I should have died and so healed me. Thank you, God. Amen
from Psalm 30

DAILY SCRIPTURE READING AND MEDITATION

Monday **Ezra 3-4; Psalm 28; Proverbs 20:24-25**
Ezra 4:19

What better legacy to have in the eyes of kings who know nothing of the Living God than a 'long history of revolt'? It's not that Israel was rebelling against the other kings just for the sake of their own national interests, they were serving the redemptive purposes of God Almighty and this left a lasting impression on the region. The mission of God will more often than not run counter to the existing culture. Today consider the legacy you are leaving as one of God's people – is it one of always blending in, or is it one of standing for the gospel and Christ-like love and integrity? And as you consider your legacy, pray for wisdom to live and engage with people in a way that the only offense is the light of the gospel illuminating sin and showing the way to redemption in Christ and not any hint of self-righteousness or hypocrisy in your heart.

Tuesday **Ezra 5-6; Psalm 29; Proverbs 20:26-27**
Psalm 29:1-2

Sometimes our prayer lives can seem dry and in a rut. There's a good chance this is because our prayers are all about us – our needs, our fears, our sins. Today, devote your prayer time entirely to praising God, ascribing glory and strength to his name. Go as deep as you can in your praise for God and feel the relief of not having to pray about yourself all the time.

Wednesday **Ezra 7:1-8:20; Psalm 30; Proverbs 20:28-30**
Ezra 7:27-28

Today, consider Ezra's thankfulness for the hand of the Lord God and James 1:17 – every good and perfect gift comes from the Father of heavenly lights. Think of everything in your life that has ever made you happy and submit your happiness to our heavenly Father in the form of thankfulness.

Thursday **Ezra 8:21-9:15; Psalm 31:1-8; Proverbs 21:1-2**
Ezra 9:6-7

Probably the hardest thing to believe in the Christian life – harder than believing God is in control when we suffer, harder than believing Jesus was born of a virgin – is believing that we *need* a Savior. Our sin has completely deceived us into thinking we're not

that bad or that we can work hard enough to erase our own sins. May God protect us all from these lies. May God soften our hearts to echo Ezra's prayer in our own hearts. Today, pray for a humility that leads to perpetual awe and thankfulness at just how deep God reached to save you.

Friday **Ezra 10; Psalm 31:9-18; Proverbs 21:3**
Ezra 10:18

Ezra ends with a very public shaming – imagine having your sin recorded in a book that people would read for thousands of years. The truth is, God does keep a record of every sin anyone ever commits, but the truth of our hope as Christians is that Jesus blood has blotted out the record of our sin and left a ledger of pure white. We never run out of reasons to praise that Man, do we?

Saturday **Nehemiah 1:1-3:14; Psalm 31:19-24; Proverbs 21:4**
Nehemiah 2:1-3, 8c

Nehemiah was afraid to request that Ataxerxes allow him to return to Jerusalem – with good reason since kings are usually pretty demanding of loyalty and prone to execute people who might threaten them. But Nehemiah's attitude about God was that he was gracious and had his hand upon him, so he made his request and God proved himself gracious. Today, consider how your life, anxiety level and decisions would look if you constantly maintained an awareness of God's goodness and control.

Sunday **Nehemiah 3:15-5:13; Psalm 32; Proverbs 21:5-7**
Nehemiah 4:1-5

The mission of God will more often than not run counter to the existing culture – and this will often saddle God's people with criticism. And what's our knee-jerk reaction to criticism but to return fire? Nehemiah and the elders model a more godly response in reacting to criticism with prayer and seeking the Lord's vindication. Of course there will be times for Christians to answer critics, but we should all remember that God has said 'Vengeance is mine.' Today, seek his wisdom to rest in the security of his hand and not give in to insecure self-defense when the time comes to make that choice.

BENEDICTION

In Christ Jesus, we are free to engage our fallen world guided by God's gracious hand.

