

Introduction

“Though a small portion of the Israelites returned from exile in Babylon, God’s glorious promises given through Isaiah, Jeremiah, and other prophets were not fulfilled. The temple was slow to be built, Jerusalem long lay in ruins, and the nations were a persistent threat to Israel’s survival. The Israelites were surely not living in the promised kingdom with the new David on the throne, ruling over the nations, with every man sitting under his own vine and fig tree. The prophets explained that the bleak situation did *not* indicate that God would not fulfill all of His promises but was the result of the people’s persistent unfaithfulness to the covenant. They also explained that judgment would come before the Lord established His kingdom on earth with a pierced Messiah sitting on the throne.”

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This year we are memorizing Isaiah 40. This week’s verse is Isaiah 40:29...
“He gives strength to the weary, and to him who lacks might He increases power.”

Day One

Read Ezra 1; ***The Proclamation of Cyrus***

1. What did you find particularly convicting or encouraging from last week’s study in Daniel?

2. From Ezra 1:1–4, how did the Lord fulfill the prophecy in Isaiah 44:28 (made more than 100 years before Cyrus’s birth) and Jeremiah 27:22?
 - a. How is God’s character and power seen in this proclamation, and how might that have comforted the returning exiles?

3. According to verse 3, why were the exiles to return to Jerusalem? Why was that significant?

4. From verses 4 and 6–10, what did Cyrus instruct to be sent with the returning exiles, and why do you think verse 7 is especially significant?
 - a. How is this story similar to the narrative of the Jews leaving Egypt in Exodus 11:1–3 and 12:35–36?

5. According to verse 5, God “stirred up” the people to return to Jerusalem. What things might the Lord be prompting you to do, and what things might be distracting you from sharing His priorities?

Day Two

Read Ezra 3–4; ***Rebuilding and Opposition***

NOTE: Ezra 2 identifies the first groups and individuals who returned to Jerusalem in 538 B.C.

1. From Ezra 3:2, 1 Chronicles 3:1–19, and Haggai 1:1, identify the two men who became leaders among the exiles and what was significant about their lineage.

2. From Ezra 3–4, summarize the following elements of Ezra’s narrative.

- a. Ezra 3:2–5; What did Israel’s leaders do once the people had settled in the towns, and what does that indicate about God’s priorities? (See also Leviticus 23:33–43.)
 - b. Ezra 3:8–10; What took place, and how did the people respond?
 - c. Ezra 4:1–7; Who heard of the rebuilding of the temple, and how did they respond?
 - d. Ezra 4:4–24; What tactics did the Samaritans use to discourage the people, and what was the result?
3. How do *you* respond when the Lord allows opposition in your life? What truths about God from these chapters in Ezra are helpful to remember during those times of discouragement?

Day Three

Read Ezra 5–6; ***The Rebuilding Resumes***

NOTE: According to Ezra 4, the opposition of the neighboring people created a sixteen-year hiatus in the building of the temple. During this pause, Haggai and Zechariah begin prophesying.

1. From Ezra 5:1–2 and Haggai 2:4–8, what were the exiles instructed to do?
 - a. Remembering Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel’s prophecies that other nations would serve and honor Yahweh and His people Israel, how do you think the opposition from the surrounding nations that Ezra details may have been different than what the exiles expected? What does that indicate about the timing of God’s promised fulfillment?
 - b. Share with your group an example of how the Lord used Scripture or a fellow believer to encourage or exhort you in a time of disappointment or complacency.
2. From Ezra 5:5 and 6:1–12, by what means did God allow the rebuilding of the temple to resume?
3. According to Ezra 6:14–18, what did Israel resume once the temple had been finished and dedicated to the Lord? Why is that significant?
 - a. From verses 14–22, what was the spiritual state of the people during this time? In verses 14 and 22, what was God’s specific involvement, and what does that teach about His character and plan for His people?

Day Four

Read Ezra 7 and 8; ***Ezra is sent to Jerusalem***

NOTE: Although Haggai and Zechariah’s urging and preaching had brought about the completion of the temple, it had not resulted in the Messiah’s return or the restoration that Israel expected. During the sixty years between Zerubbabel and Ezra, the book of Esther takes place.

1. According to Ezra 7:1–10, what happened about sixty years after Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the first group of exiles returned to Jerusalem?

2. From Ezra 7:10, what three things characterized Ezra's life? How are these things done, and why are they important?
3. From verses 15–20, what was Ezra's focus before leaving for Jerusalem? What did this demonstrate about God's Word and man's obedience?
4. Only around 7,000–8,000 people returned to Israel from Babylon with Ezra, while many Jews remained in Babylon and scattered throughout surrounding nations. What does the small number of those returning to Jerusalem reveal about the condition of the nation as a whole, as well as the fulfillment of God's promises?
 - a. How can you fight complacency in your own life and cultivate a heart of expectancy and hope in God's promises? What does that look like practically?

Day Five

Read Ezra 9–10; Dealing with Sin in the Post-Exilic Community

1. According to Ezra 9:1–2, in what condition did Ezra find the people in Jerusalem? In what specific sin were they participating?
 - a. Who was specifically identified as being involved, and why was that significant?
2. From verses 3–15, how did Ezra respond? What principles of leadership are evident in Ezra's prayer?
 - a. From verses 13–15, considering that Israel had just returned from discipline and exile only a couple of generations before, what was Ezra's fear?
3. According to Ezra 10:1–5, how did the people respond to the prophet's public mourning over Israel's sin?
4. In verses 10–17, what command did God give the people through Ezra?
 - a. What are some principles of genuine repentance seen in this passage?
 - b. As the Jews who returned to Jerusalem so clearly demonstrated, "a new start doesn't necessarily indicate a new heart" (John MacArthur). What is the condition of your own heart? Share with your group how, by God's grace, you desire to grow in faith and obedience this week.
5. How does Ezra's history of the exiles return to Jerusalem deepen your understanding of God's character and covenant promises to His people?



Women of Grace

• Lesson 24 • Overview of Ezra •

Brown

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