

PREVIEW OF EZRA

The Book of Ezra covers approximately eighty years, from the return of the majority of the people (nearly fifty thousand) under Zerubbabel to Ezra's return to Jerusalem (with about eighteen hundred men). During this time the temple was rebuilt, Esther had become queen in Persia, and the Jews' enemies had almost gained the opportunity to annihilate them openly. The renewed goodwill toward the Jews that prospered Ezra's journey may have been due to the influence of Esther and Mordecai in the king's court.

Ezra was a priest, one of Aaron's direct descendants. The book bearing his name concerns the rebuilding and furnishing of the temple and the re-establishing of proper worship.

The book recounts a fresh approach to the Jews' religious life. Old worship patterns are re-established, but the people are new. Rather than trying to change a whole nation of rebels, God dealt with the one in ten, and ten in one hundred, who voluntarily chose to follow Him (Isaiah 6:13). However, these groups that God stirred up to return had been conditioned by the life and thinking of the heathen. They needed the clear, uncompromising leadership that Ezra very capably provided.

Ezra was firm in maintaining pure worship and clear fellowship lines. He rejected the deceptive help of religious professors. He worked to build personal confidence and faith. The people needed encouragement to keep God's work first, lest they lapse into materialism. Unlawful family ties needed to be severed.

Ezra's concern and dedication become evident in his agony upon learning of the people's unfaithfulness. He was appalled and utterly ashamed before God. How could they depart after God had been so gracious in giving them a little reviving and "a nail in his holy place"?

This history is significant in that Ezra faced many of the same issues we have encountered and must continue to address in these last days. May the utter foolishness of unfaithfulness grip us as we study these lessons.

Restoration From Captivity

Lesson Scope: [Ezra chapter 1:1 through 3:7](#)

References in brackets relate to Lesson Scope unless noted otherwise

Lesson Focus

The first chapter of the Book of Ezra records the fulfillment of God's promise to the nation of Israel through Jeremiah. "After seventy years I will visit you, . . . causing you to return to this place" (Jeremiah 29: 10). The years in Babylon were sad years of reflection. It was difficult to sing, and they hung their harps on the willows (Psalm 137).

Right on schedule, God brought down the Babylonian Empire in defeat and established the Medo-Persian Empire (see Daniel 5:30-31). Isaiah had prophesied of this day in chapters 44 and 45, even calling Cyrus by name. This was about 175 years before it came to pass.

God was not only unfolding His purpose for the nation of Israel, but also for the whole world. God was moving toward rebuilding Jerusalem for the coming Messiah, through whom He could bless both Jew and Gentile with salvation.

The primary purpose of the Old Testament era was to introduce and bring into existence the Redeemer of the world. The primary purpose of the New Testament era is to set captive sinners free through the work of Jesus Christ (Isaiah 61:1). We can further God's purpose today by building our thoughts around that. Each of us has a personal part to play in advancing His purposes today. Let us willingly do our part.

God is well able to superintend men and circumstances to fulfill His promises at the appointed time. His faithfulness should cause His people to accept His provision and to worship Him.

Lesson Aim: To present truths related to God unfolding His purposes in the world.

Theme Verse: [Psalm 106:47](#). Save us, O LORD our God, and gather us from among the heathen, to give thanks unto thy holy name, and to triumph in thy praise.

Lesson Text

The Return of Faithful Jews

Ezra 1:1-11 ^(KJV) 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 forth by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and numbered them unto Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah. ⁹ And this *is* the number of them: thirty chargers of gold, a thousand chargers of silver, nine and twenty knives, ¹⁰ Thirty basons of gold, silver basons of a second *sort* four hundred and ten, *and* other vessels a thousand. 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.

The Restoration of Their Land

Ezra 2:1-2 Now these *are* the children of the province that went up out of the captivity, of those which had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away unto Babylon, and came again unto Jerusalem and Judah, every one unto his city; ² Which

came with Zerubbabel: Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, Baanah. The number of the men of the people of Israel:

Ezra 2:64 The whole congregation together *was* forty and two thousand three hundred *and* threescore,

Ezra 2:70 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.

The Renewal of Scriptural Worship

Ezra 3:1-5 And when the seventh month was come, and the children of Israel *were* in the cities, the people gathered themselves together as one man to Jerusalem. ² Then stood up Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brethren the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and his brethren, and builded the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings thereon, as *it is* written in the law of Moses the man of God. ³ And they set the altar upon his bases; for fear *was* upon them because of the people of those countries: and they offered burnt offerings thereon unto the LORD, *even* burnt offerings morning and evening. ⁴ They kept also the feast of tabernacles, as *it is* written, and *offered* the daily burnt offerings by number, according to the custom, as the duty of every day required; ⁵ And afterward *offered* the continual burnt offering, both of the new moons, and of all the set feasts of the LORD that were consecrated, and of every one that willingly offered a freewill offering unto the LORD.

Questions for Study

The Return of Faithful Jews

1. What significance do you see in the restoration of all the vessels for the Lord's house?
2. What does God's Word reveal?
3. In What way does individual involvement glorify God?

The Restoration of Their Land

4. Did all the faithful Jews return at this time? Explain.
5. How do we dwell in our "cities" today?

The Renewal of Scriptural Worship

6. Who took responsibility for directing the worship? Where did the people receive their instructions?

7. Why did the Jews fear the people of “those countries” (3:3)?
8. How can we gather “as one man” (3:1)?

Analysing the Passage

The last two verses of 2 Chronicles are practically the same as the first two verses of Ezra. This makes a seamless connection in the historical record. It begins with the first year of King Cyrus’s reign. Cyrus was king over the Medo-Persian Empire. Cyrus restored many of the Chaldean captives to their homelands. The Jews were one of these nations.

In 1:1 and 5 the record says that God stirred up their spirit. He did this with the aid of His Holy Spirit.

The names Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel refer to the same person. The former is his Babylonian name; the latter is his Jewish name.

Jeshua (3:2) is the same High Priest referred to as Joshua in Zechariah 3:1 and Haggai 1:1.

Principles and Applications

The Return of Faithful Jews

1. The Word reveals God’s purposes for mankind (1:1). All that we need to know about God is told in His Word. The past, the present, and the future are expounded on. Where we came from, what we are here for, and what to expect in the future are spelled out between its covers. It is the operator’s manual for mankind.

2. God at times uses earthly Gentile rulers to further His purposes (1:1). Some of the prophets struggled with why God would use an ungodly nation to punish His people. Here we have the opposite: An ungodly nation brings blessing to God’s people. We will never fully understand the mind of God. But one thing we know: His purposes will always triumph. Nothing man can do will undermine the purposes of God. He never needs a backup plan.

3. God moves in the affairs of men for worship and glory to His name (1:2). Think of numerous Bible examples: Jacob and Laban, Joseph in Egypt, Moses and Pharaoh, David and Saul, Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar, the three Hebrews and Nebuchadnezzar, Daniel and Darius, Jesus and Pilate, and Paul with the chief captain. God, who rules and overrules in the kingdoms of men and causes unusual things to happen, brings glory to Himself.

4. God uses His people to advance His purposes in the world (1:3).

Through the seed of Abraham, God brought the nation of Israel into existence. The promises to Abraham follow his faithful lineage through time. It was through this nation, particularly the tribe of Judah, that God brought His only begotten Son into the world. Through Christ, all nations of the world are blessed. God is still using His people to advance His cause.

5. Individual involvement in and support for God's work helps to advance God's purposes in the world (1:4-7, 11). God always supplies someone to fill the necessary place in His kingdom work. Just as much as He needed Paul, He needed John Mark, Luke, Timothy, Titus, Dorcas, and a host more of unnamed helpers to build the church of their day. He needs you today. Can He depend on you?

The Restoration of Their Land

6. God arranges opportunities for men of God to promote His cause (2:1-2, 64, 70). He made some pastors, some teachers, and some other helpers. He arranges opportunities to cross our path. God has a plan. He causes things to happen in proper sequence, but we must be looking for the opportunity or we might miss it.

The Renewal of Scriptural Worship

7. A corporate, unified effort on the part of God's people advances God's cause in the world (3:1). Three men can lift a burden that not one could lift himself. The church, the Sunday school, the school, and the home all saying the same thing make it difficult for youth to stray. Going alone exposes us to far more danger than when we are part of a group. The strength of a group is often greater than the sum of its parts.

8. Godly leaders who give direction from the Word of God advance His cause in the world (3:2). Sometimes leaders are tempted to weave in worldly philosophy or to rationalize their ideas. This weakens their impact. The closer leaders stay to God's Word, the more effective they will be in furthering His cause. God's Word has an impact upon men far greater than any other resource of knowledge.

9. Right worship insulates God's people from the contaminating influence of the surrounding society and promotes God's overall purposes in the world (3:3). "I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the LORD" (Psalm 122:1). Right worship is a rest stop on the highway of life that helps to keep us focused. It is a refuelling

station that gives us energy to continue to press upward. It helps to keep things running smoothly. Right worship fortifies us against the enemy and exposes his tactics.

10. Healthy, Scriptural worship secures God's people a place in His kingdom work (3:4-5). It prepares us to meet whatever opportunities may come our way. Morning worship sets the tone for our day. A hymn may continue to float through the corridors of our mind. A Scripture verse may linger in our short-term memory. Evening devotions helps to wash away contamination that took place during the day. If you are speechless when an opportunity comes your way, maybe you should do a check-up on your worship practices.

Important Teachings

1. The Word reveals God's purposes for mankind (1:1).
2. God at times uses earthly Gentile rulers to further His purposes (1:1).
3. God moves in the affairs of men for worship and glory to His name (1:2).
4. God uses His people to advance His purposes in the world (1:3).
5. Individual involvement in and support for God's work helps to advance God's purposes in the world (1:4-7, 11).
6. God arranges opportunities for men of God to promote His cause (2:1-2, 64, 70).
7. A corporate, unified effort on the part of God's people advances God's cause in the world (3:1).
8. Godly leaders who give direction from the Word of God advance His cause in the world (3:2).
9. Right worship insulates God's people from the contaminating influence of the surrounding society and promotes God's overall purposes in the World (3:3).
10. Healthy, Scriptural worship secures God's people a place in His kingdom Work (3:4-5).

Answers to Questions

1. What significance do you see in the restoration of all the vessels for the Lord's house?

What seemed like an awful loss when Nebuchadnezzar removed them actually turned into good. The temple was destroyed and burned. If they

had been left in the temple, they would have been lost or plundered instead, Nebuchadnezzar had put them in safekeeping. When Belshazzar desecrated them, God punished him. In this lesson text, Cyrus returned them all. The wonder of it helps us to believe that God “is able to keep that which [is] committed unto him against that day” (2 Timothy 1:12) without the loss of any.

2. What does God’s Word reveal?

God’s Word reveals His purpose for making man. It answers the basic questions of life and death. It gives us many promises we can rest in because it also records many examples of God’s faithfulness. God’s Word reveals His plan for the future of His people.

3. In what way does individual involvement glorify God?

Each of us fills our unique spot in God’s purpose. If we fit into His purpose and allow Him to use us, we help to move His purpose along. It may seem to be an insignificant role, but everyone’s work is important. If we refuse to fill our place, His purpose will go on in spite of us rather than because of us and we will lose the blessing.

4. Did all the faithful Jews return at this time? Explain.

No, there were three returns. This was the first. God moved some at this time to go. Others gave of their substance. It was all done of their free will, as God moved in their hearts. Likely the reason some stayed behind was due to the journey. Some were too old; others were too young but many who did not go were still in support of God’s work.

5. How do we dwell in our “cities” today?

It is not necessarily wrong to move from one area to another, especially if the church asks us to. But people who leap about from place to place and from church group to church group often lose their sense of belonging. It is part of the individualistic culture of our day. God had a reason for placing us where we are, and we had better be cautious about acting on impulse or making hasty moves. There is a lot that can be learned from the Jews dwelling in their own cities.

6. Who took responsibility for directing the worship? Where did the people receive their instructions?

It was not the singers, or the porters, or the Nethinims, but the priests, as God had directed in the past. God designed the structure of the congregation. As they each took their proper order, God could bless. They

received their instructions out of the Law of Moses. The Law that had been disregarded now became their model to live by.

7. Why did the Jews fear the people of “those countries” (3:3)?

The people of “those countries” had other goals in view. They wanted to be in control of Palestine. They were intimidated by the Jews because God was with them, which made them feel powerless.

8. How can we gather “as one man” (3:1)?

Gathering “as one man” shows unity of purpose. No one is looking to lift himself up. We all have one goal in mind: Let us worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness. How great the things that can be accomplished when we can focus on common goals!

Summarizing the Lesson

God uses men to accomplish His purposes. Some know and understand that He is using them, and others are moved by His Spirit in ways they fail to comprehend. Are we living close to God and in obedience to His revealed will so that we are available for Him to use us? God continues to unfold His purposes all through time. “To God be the glory, great things He hath done!”

Research Guide

1. Study the uses of the names Zerubbabel and Sheshbazzar in the following references: Ezra 1:8; 5:14, 16; Haggai 1:1; Zechariah 4:9.
2. In a Bible handbook such as Halley’s or Unger’s, study the introductory information under Ezra and the comments on chapters 1-3.