

15 - Ezra

Ezra

Key Verse:

INTRODUCTION TO EZRA

When the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC, they deported the best people to Babylon. The Babylonian captivity was God's judgment on his idolatrous people. God's purpose was to lead them to repentance. The Babylonian captivity, according to Jeremiah's prophecy, was to last 70 years. Cyrus the Persian conquered Babylon in 539 BC and allowed the first exiles led by Zerubbabel to return to build the temple. The temple was completed after much struggle in 516 BC--70 years after it had been destroyed. Ezra lived in Babylon. He led the second large group of exiles back to Jerusalem in 458 BC. Ezra's mission was to be a shepherd and Bible teacher for the exiles who had forgotten God's laws and were wandering in a spiritual and moral wilderness. Nehemiah came a few years later (445 BC) and rebuilt the wall.

Ezra probably wrote 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Psalm 119. In Ezra 1-6, he writes about the first returnees. They had finished rebuilding the temple. In the remaining chapters, he describes his own ministry. He was concerned about the compromises and the idolatry which had corrupted the returned exiles. Ezra 7:10 is the key verse: "For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel."

GOD MOVES PEOPLE'S HEARTS

Ezra 1:1-11

Key Verse: 1:1,5

1. God keeps his word (1-4)

The Lord had promised that after 70 years the Jews exiled in Babylon could return to Jerusalem. God kept his word by allowing Cyrus king of Persia to conquer Babylon. Then he moved the king's heart to allow the exiles to return and rebuild the temple of the Lord. (See Isa 44:28; Jer 29:10.) He acknowledged the God of heaven; he recognized that his power came from God, and he believed that God had appointed him to build the temple in Jerusalem (2). God controls history; sometimes he uses kings and worldly men to accomplish his purposes.

2. God moved the people's hearts (5-11)

At first, life in exile had been hard. After many years, however, they became Babylonians. The Jews bought into Babylon, and it was hard to leave and return to the devastated land of Judah. God moved the hearts of a few leaders to accept this mission and return to rebuild the temple.

Prayer: Lord, help me to see what you want to do in my time and accept your mission. Thank you for keeping your promises.

One Word: Accept God's mission

LAYING THE TEMPLE FOUNDATIONS

Ezra 2:1-2, 68-3:13

Key Verse: 3:3

1. Survival in a hard land (2:1-2,68-70)

The land had become a wilderness, so life was hard. But the returned exiles first gave a free-will offering for the rebuilding of the temple. Then they began the hard task of surviving.

2. Rebuilding the altar (3:1-6)

Spiritual survival was most urgent. The people of the land were godless and materialistic, so it was not easy for the returned exiles to have a clear identity as God's people. They overcame fear, rebuilt the altar and began worshiping God in the way prescribed in the Bible.

3. Laying the temple foundations (7-13)

Laying foundations is hard. It requires a decision of faith, much work and sacrifice, and co-working. When the foundations were laid, all the people shouted praise to the Lord. Some shouted for joy, some wept in sorrow, but all praised the Lord.

Prayer: Lord, help us to lay spiritual foundations through 1:1 Bible study.

One Word: Overcome fear; lay foundations

ENEMIES HINDER GOD'S WORK

Ezra 4:1-24

Key Verse 4:3

1. We will build alone (1-5)

When men accept God's mission and begin to do his work, the devil always sends enemies to harass them. The people of the land said that they also worshiped God and they offered to help build the temple. But their religion was mixed with idol worship (2Ki 17). The Jews refused their offer of help. Their refusal seems narrow-minded, but according to 4:1, they were enemies. When God's people refused to compromise, the people of the land actively sought to hinder them.

2. Discouragement and political pressure (6-24)

Discouragement is the devil's most useful tool. The enemies of God's people worked hard to discourage the returnees. They planted fear; they tried to frustrate the work. When this failed, they seized an opportunity when Artaxerxes became Emperor. They wrote him and lodged a complaint. Though their charge was groundless, the work was stopped for nearly 15 years. God's people could only pray and wait.

Prayer: Lord, help me to overcome fear and discouragement, and to wait on your time and pray.

One Word: Don't compromise; wait and pray

GOD WATCHES OVER HIS PEOPLE

Ezra 5:1-17

Key Verse: 5:5

1. God's servants give direction (1-4)

A political change occurred in the Persian Empire and Darius became emperor. A few men of faith saw their opportunity. Haggai and Zechariah were men of God. They taught God's word and encouraged Zerubbabel and Jeshua to begin again to build the temple. They began by faith.

2. The eye of their God was watching over them (5-6)

Sure enough, the local officials came to investigate. They wrote down the names of the men who were building. They had no building permit! The Jews were fearful, but they knew that God was watching over them. They kept on building.

3. A letter to King Darius (7-17)

The governor's letter to the king was not negative. He reported on the work; he reported what the builders had said about why they were building the temple.

Prayer: Lord, help me to do your work before your eyes. Keep your eye on us; protect and guide and defend us.

One Word: The eye of God is on his people

THE TEMPLE COMPLETED

Ezra 6:1-22

Key Verse: 6:10

1. The decree of King Darius (1-12)

God answered his people's prayer and moved the heart of King Darius. He looked up the records and found that King Cyrus had indeed authorized the construction of the temple. King Darius told the district governor not to interfere with the building of the temple; rather, to assist in any way he could. He ordered that construction costs be paid from the royal treasury, and that animals for sacrifice also be provided. He requested prayer for himself and his sons.

2. Two joyful celebrations (13-22)

The people joyfully dedicated the temple. It represented God's presence in their midst. They studied the Bible and established temple worship according to the word of God. Then, they joyfully celebrated the Passover, remembering God's grace and his deliverance, and how he had worked to change the attitude of the king.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for opening a way for your people when they do your work by faith. Help us to rejoice in your presence.

One Word: God's presence brings joy

THE HAND OF THE LORD WAS WITH HIM

Ezra 7:1-28

Key Verse: 7:6

1. A diligent Bible teacher (1-10)

Some 60 years after the completion of the temple, Ezra led the second group of exiles back from Babylon. The hand of the Lord was with him, and the king granted him everything he asked. Ezra was a priest and a Bible teacher--and a shepherd. He devoted himself to Bible teaching, and helped the people put God's law into practice.

2. The king's mandate (11-28)

Ezra returned with the blessing and full support of King Artaxerxes. The king knew that rebuilding the moral foundations of the country was even more urgent than rebuilding the country materially. The king feared the God of Israel and sent Ezra back to Jerusalem to teach the Bible to the people, so that they could live and worship according to God's laws. Ezra realized that the hand of God was on him, so he took courage and persuaded the leading men of Israel to go with him.

Prayer: Lord, rebuild the moral foundations of our land on the word of God.

One Word: Study and teach the Bible

EZRA'S RETURN TO JERUSALEM

Ezra 8:(1-14),15-36

Key Verse: 8:22

1. Men useful to God must go (15-20)

When Ezra looked over the list of those going with him to Jerusalem, he realized that he needed more Levites. Levites were lay servants of God who did the real work in the temple and in temple worship. He insisted that men who were useful to God go with him. The gracious hand of God was on him to supply faithful and capable men.

2. Utter dependence on God (21-36)

Ezra had told the king that God is with everyone who looks to him for help. So he was ashamed to ask for a military escort. He and the twelve leading priests were carrying great treasures of gold and silver for the temple, and the journey was through bandit-filled territory. He and the people humbled themselves before God in fasting and prayer, and asked for a safe journey. The hand of God was with them and they arrived safely in Jerusalem.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for answering the prayers of those who humble themselves before you in fasting and prayer.

One Word: The gracious hand of our God

GOD HATES COMPROMISE

Ezra 9:1-15

Key Verse: 9:15

1. Unfaithful people (1-4)

Ezra was appalled to see that many of God's people, including the leaders, had intermarried with the Canaanites. The Canaanite culture was corrupt. It involved sexual perversion, idol worship, etc. God had told his people not to compromise with the Canaanites and not to intermarry with them. When Ezra saw how marriage had degenerated from a holy institution into a human arrangement, he tore his clothes and sat down on the ground all day in self-abasement. Then he fell on his knees in prayer.

2. Ezra's prayer (5-15)

Ezra shared the responsibility for the sins of his people in his confession. He thanked God for his mercy in sparing a remnant to return and rebuild the temple. He confessed their sins and guilt in disobeying God's word and intermarrying with the people of the land.

Prayer: Lord, we are sinners who cannot stand before you. Purge us from our idolatry and heal our unfaithfulness.

One Word: Don't compromise

HOPE FOR REPENTANT SINNERS

Ezra 10:1-17 (18-44)

Key Verse: 10:2b

1. Sitting in the rain in misery (1-15)

Ezra's tears of repentance moved the hearts of the returnees. They realized that their only hope lay in real repentance. So, on an appointed day, all the men gathered in the square in Jerusalem. It was raining hard. Ezra ignored the rain; he reminded them that they had been unfaithful to God in marrying godless women. He challenged them to repent and separate from the godless people of the land. They didn't argue; they agreed to do as he said— but they wanted to come in out of the rain!

2. The fruit of repentance (16-17)

The returnees repented of their unfaithfulness and compromised lives. They set a drastic course of action. Perhaps they were too extreme— but it was a matter of spiritual survival. Ezra saved his people by teaching repentance and the obedience that comes from faith.

Prayer: Lord, help us to realize that we can't compromise with sin. Help me to teach your word faithfully, as Ezra did.

One Word: There is hope if we repent