

ABIDE

DISCOVERING YOUR OLD TESTAMENT



REBUILDING THE TEMPLE

EZRA

Jeremiah 25:11-12 says this: “And this whole land shall be a desolation, and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. And it shall come to pass, when seventy years are accomplished, that I will punish the king of Babylon, and that nation, saith the LORD, for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans, and will make it perpetual desolations.”

Jeremiah 29:10-11 says this: “For thus saith the LORD, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.”

These verses just quoted are where we are fast-forwarded to from where we ended off in 2 Chronicles. God finally instituted judgment on His people and they were carried away into Babylonian captivity for seventy years just as God had told them they would be.

However, in Jeremiah’s prophecy, God tells them that after their seventy years were completed, He would bring their captivity to an end, judge Babylon for their sin against God’s people, and then return them back to the land from which they were taken.

This is the portion of the nation’s history in which we find ourselves when entering into the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther.

At this point, it is important to remember that the Old Testament is not in chronological order. When we look at the last of the historical books, time has sped up. Now, when we get to prophetic books, we will have to back track a bit inside the time of kings and Chronicles.

But, once we broach into the last three historical books, the people are done with their captivity and once we move into Ezra we read these words in **chapter 1, verses 1-2**, “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 the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, 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.”

Around 538 BC, Cyrus allowed God’s people to return to their homeland; and around 535 BC, God commissioned this same king who was used by God to rebuild the temple. That’s incredible!

So this is the purpose behind this book. It is named for its human author, Ezra, who cataloged the return back to Jerusalem with God’s people and the rebuilding of the temple.

Furthermore, by way of introduction, we also need to know about Ezra himself. To find this out, we can go to Ezra 7 where the names of his heritage are given to us and we ultimately find out that Ezra was a son of Aaron the chief priest. In other words he was from the tribe of Levi, the priestly line of the twelve tribes of Israel. We also learn from verse 6 of chapter 7 that he was "...a ready scribe in the law of Moses..." He was God's preacher during this time and he was the spiritual leader during this time who helped the spiritual transition of God's people once they were back home.

How to Think About Ezra

Ezra is one of those books in the Bible that is not studied too often, and that really is a shame! It is a tremendous book about the fulfilling of God's promises and the spiritual revival and restoration of God's people.

However, before we get into the layout of the book and how to approach it, what needs to be discussed is the fact that this book is broken up into two different sections. The first section occurs in the first six chapters when the people were originally guided by a political leader by the name of Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel was the individual that led about 50,000 Jews back to Jerusalem to start their new lives there and helped start and complete the temple rebuilding project.

The second section occurs after chapter 6, where there is a 60 year gap before you get to chapter 7 and Ezra comes on the scene. Knowing this we are able to better understand the flow of the book.

The Story of Cyrus (Chapter 1): Chapter 1 is dedicated to explaining how God's people were released in the first place. As quoted earlier, Ezra 1:2 says that it was king Cyrus' understanding that God had spoken to him and charged him to build the temple in Jerusalem.

The glory of chapter 1 is that it was God who moved the king's heart to both release God's people and fund the temple building project! What an amazing chapter!

The Names of the People (Chapter 2): Here you can read the list of names of the individuals who were carried away into Babylon, but came back to Jerusalem after they were released. This is the first wave of those who returned with Zerubbabel in 538 BC.

The Reconstruction Project (Chapter 3): In this chapter, corporate services for worship were conducted, sacrifices were offered, and the foundations for the temple were laid.

The Resistance to the Project (Chapters 4-5): These chapters tell us about how the "enemies" of Benjamin and Judah want to help build the temple because they in fact worship the same God as the Jewish people.

Now, what might not be readily obvious here is the fact that the people you are reading about in these chapters are a people you are very familiar with in the New Testament, a people known as the Samaritans. They open their hand and ask to be involved in the building project. However, their help was denied and they became very bitter. In fact, because they were not allowed to be involved, they made it their mission to attempt to make sure the project was halted, and in some ways, they were successful. The hand of friendship extended out before the Jews quickly turned to one of hatred, and the reverberations from this one instance were felt for hundreds of years afterward.

The Revival Project (Chapter 6): Wouldn't you know, even after the people were hindered, hurt, and halted from completing the temple project— even when they were beaten down and discouraged, thinking they would never finish the job, God gave them exactly what they needed... encouragement!

The way God sent this encouragement was by way of a couple of prophets named Haggai and Zechariah.

Chapter 6:14 says, *"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."*

God sent a revival so that His people would be encouraged and His work would be completed.

This whole process took about 20 years to complete, and then there is a 60 year break between this time and the time of Ezra (as mentioned previously). What is also important to know is that once Ezra steps onto the scene, the events that took place from chapter 7 to the end of the book (chapter 10) happen in about 1 year.

The Story of Ezra (Chapters 7-8): Ezra came in with the second wave of people in about 458 BC. In this instance, Ezra was not in charge and whatever he asked for the king gave him.

The Confession of Sins (Chapter 9): Here you read of the people committing the same sins that had led them into captivity in the first place. Seventy years in captivity had apparently taught them nothing and Ezra became so upset that he tore his clothes and pulled out his hair. He then must confess the sins of the people.

The Repentance of the People (Chapter 10): Israel repents and puts themselves back in a covenant with God according to His law.

What to Look for in Ezra

It is not often in life when you get a fresh start. More than this, it's not very often in life where this fresh start comes financed by a third-party in order to help you along, but this is exactly what happened to God's people. And as great a blessing as God gave in this regard, there was still a heavy amount of work to be done and a tremendous amount of struggle to overcome. It is inside the context of these experiences that we find some interesting themes that surface.

Key People—

Zerubbabel: As mentioned before, this man was a political leader and the man who took care of the leadership responsibilities of God's people for 20 years until Ezra came on the scene. It is important to note this man's leadership.

Ezra: The scribe and Bible teacher who lead a continual spiritual renewal of God's people once Zerubbabel stepped off the scene.

Cyrus: The Persian king who conquered Babylon and allowed God's people to move back to Jerusalem from captivity. He also financed the temple project and provided letters of compliance to all who would be a hindrance to the project.

Haggai: The main prophet whom God used to encourage the people so that the temple project would be completed.

Key Themes—

God's Supreme Sovereignty— This is what stands out among all other spiritual truths in this book. Every step of the way God uses laymen, politicians, prophets, and kings to bring to pass exactly what He said He would.

Man's Supreme Depravity— You stare in bewilderment as you read of Israel's sin in chapter 9. The same thing that led them away from God in the first place, and the same thing they had been judged for over and over again, is the same thing they were doing right after they returned. They were taking foreign wives and being polluted in such a way that would lead them back into idolatry. It was clear, they had learned absolutely nothing from their captivity at this point.

What to Gain from Ezra

The Resiliency of Evil Against God's People— This is a theme we will run into in the book of Nehemiah as well: As long as we are living for God, we will be fighting for His purposes. After the help from the Samaritans was denied, these people were a relentless hindrance to God's people in their quest to rebuild the temple. This was to the point of almost giving up. If you've ever felt like giving up because of relentless spiritual badgering, you are in good company.

The Refreshing Nature of God's Word— God's word is the only spiritual balm we have to persevere and make it through this life. Once again, God's people were so beaten down by delay, insults, and jeering from the Samaritan people that they wanted to give up. But as soon as God gave His word from the prophets, all of the negative clamoring in the world could not stop them.

This is an important lesson for the believer. We fight Satan with Scripture, not with willpower. This is also a warning for us to always make Scripture a priority in our lives.

The Richness and Depth of God's Forgiveness— Here we learn an important lesson about repentance. We learn that it takes more than confessing with our mouths, it takes turning with our feet. These marital relationships with pagan women had to be abandoned. Understand, these are real emotions experienced by real people. Turning from this kind of sin wasn't as simple as turning off the television. Sometimes real repentance really hurts and is really hard depending on how long we let it go and how far down the road we've gone. God doesn't call us to the easy way, He calls us to a better way.

What we find in this book is that God does forgive them and restoration is given. This is an obvious tie to the unconditional forgiveness that we experience now in Christ Jesus.



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