**A New Relationship**



Five Studies in Ezra

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# Introduction

The temple was initially built by the Israelites in the time of King Solomon. It was a magnificent building that was the centrepoint of their worship and relationship with God. However the Israelites fell away from God until – as his prophets had predicted – Israel was invaded by the Babylonians. The Babylonians destroyed the temple and took the Israelites as captives to Babylon for seventy years. At this time the Israelites had lost the one place they could worship their God according to the Law and had to struggle to keep their identity in a distant land.

The Babylonian empire was then destroyed by the Medes and the Persians in 539 BC. The Persian empire had very different practises in how it related to its subject peoples. Under the Persian King Cyrus, some of the Israelites were allowed to come back from Babylon specifically to rebuild the temple. The story of this time is told in Ezra and Nehemiah, which take place during the time of the following Persian kings:

 Cyrus 539 to 530 BC

 Cambyses 530 to 522 BC

 Darius I 522 to 486 BC

 Ahaseurus (Xerxes) 486 to 465 BC

 Artaxerxes I 465 to 422 BC

Ezra focuses on the rebuilding of the temple, while Nehemiah is concerned with the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. However, both have a focus on how the Israelites relate to God and follow him during this time. Ezra, as a priest, focuses on the religious side of this relationship and how the Israelites worship their God.

# Study One – Ezra 1 and 2

*Read Jeremiah 29:10-14.*

What did God promise to his people in exile in Babylon?

*Read Ezra 1.*

What strikes you from this passage?

How is God’s promise fulfilled? What does Cyrus command? (v2-4)

The literal translation of the Hebrew in Ezra 1:1 is that God “stirred up the Spirit of Cyrus” and in 1:5 that “everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the House of the Lord” (both translations from the ESV). These both allude to Jer 51:1 which reads “I will stir up the spirit of a destroyer against Babylon”. Ezra is making clear that now God has caused the destruction of Babylon, he is causing people to act in accordance with His plans to restore His people.

How does he work in the Israelites lives to cause some of them to return?

How does God work in Cyrus’ life to enable the temple to be rebuilt? (v1)

How does Cyrus describe what God has done for him?

What is provided for the new temple? Where does it come from?

God stipulated that the Israelites were not to sacrifice to Him anywhere but were to gather at a place of his picking to worship Him. (Dt. 12:5-14) This was originally where His ark was until the temple was built in Jerusalem. When the Babylonians destroyed the temple, they destroyed the one centrepoint of the Israelite religion, the one place they could according to the law correctly worship relate to and sacrifice to their God. It showed how bad their relationship with God had become. The temple being rebuilt was the most important symbol of a renewed relationship with their God.

With Jesus coming, the temple becomes the gathering of God’s people. How do you prioritise your relationship with God by gathering with His people?

The gold and silver provided by the king and those not interested in returning is an echo of silver and gold gifted to the Israelites when they asked the Egyptians for it before leaving Egypt. (Exodus 12:31-36) Those not interested in returning to where they could rightly worship and relate to God still would contribute to it as 1:6 clearly alludes to the spoiling of the Egyptians.

How does God use the authorities to fulfil his plans? Does it surprise you that God uses a pagan king to fulfil his purposes?

How well do we trust God to work his plans and purpose in our lives and our church’s life? In what areas do we struggle to trust him?

How have you seen God work in your life?

How do we know if God is calling us to something?

*Read Ezra 2:1-2 and v59-70. Scan v3-58.*

What are the different groups of people that are listed? What does this emphasise?

Why did it matter if a family could not prove their ancestry? (v59-62) How does this disqualify a priest?

Only people who were descendants of Aaron could be priests. (Exodus 29:1-9) This was declared after God asked the Israelites to be a royal priesthood, but they reject knowing him. (Exodus 19:1-8, 20:18-19) While being a priest was a position of importance it was not a position someone could claim through wealth or influence.

What do the families do when they arrive in Jerusalem?

What contributions are made towards the rebuilding? (v68-69) What does this show us about their attitude towards the work?

It is clear that both the gold and silver that was plundered from the original temple and being returned was very considerable, but also that the people’s contribution that more than matches at least in number of items is very significant. This is in addition to the freewill offerings and livestock.

What type of challenge does such generosity present to us in our giving today?

How do we grow in generosity towards God? How should we commit ourselves to giving generously?

*Read Ezra 3:1-6.*

What do you notice?

Who builds the altar? What does this show about their concern for God’s Law?

What does them building the altar first, their celebration of festivals and their sacrifices show about their focus and dependence on God?

When God moves us to serve him, do we trust Him to use us to help achieve His purposes?

Suggested prayer points:

* Thank God that He is in charge of our lives and that he does provide for us
* Ask God to grow the generosity of your hearts and that would be backed up by your actions
* Ask God to use you for His purposes and to enable you to trust Him in that

# Study Two – Ezra 3 and 4

*Read Ezra 3.*

What stands out to you?

How do Israel determine how to worship God? What do they do to celebrate? (v2-5)

Do we let scripture shape how we live and worship God?

How do Israel start building the temple? (v7-9)

How do they respond to the foundations being laid? (v10-12) What does this say about their focus?

Why do some people weep? (v12) What has happened to Israel since the first temple was built?

The second temple of Haggai's day was built on the same land as the first temple (built by Solomon), but the second temple was much less impressive. It had little or no ornamentation. While the temple was gradually added to and by the time Jesus began preaching to Israel the temple was once again magnificent, at this time it would have felt like little compared to the old temple.

Israel trusted God and worshipped him according to the Old Testament Law. Now Jesus has come, where is our temple and our sacrifice? How does that affect how we worship God now?

How do we keep our focus on God in the midst of doing things for him?

*Read Ezra 4:1-5.*

What did you notice?

Who offers to help build the temple? How do the Israelites respond to the offer of help?

Why do Israel keep themselves separate from their neighbours as they build the temple? How does making a distinction between Israel and their neighbours show their identity as the people of God?

The other nations worshipped multiple gods. Allowing them to join in would be including God in a pantheon of idols, one of the sins that took the Israelites into exile. Rejecting their help showed the Israelites wanted to stand out as the people of God rather than joining in with the ways of their neighbours.

Where should we demonstrate this separateness in our lives today? Where shouldn’t we?

How do the nations react to Judah’s refusal? (v4-5) What are their intentions?

Here there is a cost to God’s people maintaining their identity. How have you experienced a cost to standing out as belonging to Christ?

*Read Ezra 4:6-24.*

What strikes you from this passage?

It is likely that this is a later letter from the time of Ezra to demonstrate the type of opposition the Israelites had to put up with. The originals hearers and readers of the book would know this by the reference to a king of a latter period (see the introduction for the list of kings), although it is not so obvious to us today. The letter is written in Aramaic as this was the language of the Mede and Persian empire.

Who puts their name on the letter to King Artaxerxes? (v9-10) What does this show about Israel’s enemies?

How does the letter describe Jerusalem and the Jews?

How does the letter describe what the Jews are rebuilding? Why does the letter say this must be stopped? (v13, v16)

How does Artaxerxes describe Jerusalem in his reply? Why does Artaxerxes consider the building a threat to his empire?

What is the effect of the opposition to the temple’s rebuilding? (v23-24)

Does the temple project stop forever? (v24) What does this show us about God’s plans?

Do you ever encounter opposition because you are a Christian? Are there any areas in which you face such opposition now?

What hope can we hold on to in the face of opposition?

How can we respond to opposition with wisdom and love?

Suggesed prayer points:

* Thank God that He is in control of our lives and that we can trust him to do so whatever our circumstances
* Ask that we would keep our focus on Jesus and learn to be dependent on Him whatever our circumstances
* Pray for any in the group who are facing opposition in their lives because of Christ for their situation. Ask that God would use this to build His kingdom.

# Study Three – Ezra 5 and 6

*Read Ezra 5.*

What did you notice?

How are the prophecies of Zechariah and Haggai described? How did the Jews respond to these prophesies?

In what ways would the prophets help God’s people working on building the temple? (v2)

How do people speak God’s Word to us today? Why is this an important help for us?

How do the officials of the region react to the rebuilding? (v3-6) How might God’s people have felt about this?

Who does the passage suggest enabled the building to continue? (v5) Did this mean that the intimidation ended immediately?

How do the officials describe the building project? Why might they give the names of the leaders (v8-10)

What response do Israel give? (v11-17)

How do Israel describe God’s role in events? (V11-16) What attitude does this show towards God?

Have there been difficult times where you had to trust God was in control? How did you find this?

How do Israel explain the temple project to King Darius? (v13-17) What do the Israelites ask the king to do?

Decrees of the Mede and Persian kings could not be revoked even by the king. This could cause issues as the king might want to role back an earlier decree when he realised its consequences as in Esther 8:5-13 and Daniel 6:10-24. The Israelites were using this to persuade the king that he should be encouraging them to follow a decree of a previous king.

*Read Ezra 6:1-15.*

What stood out to you?

How does the decree of Cyrus describe the temple? (v3-5) According to Darius, what is the purpose of the temple? (v10)

What is the temple’s actual purpose? Why does God care so much about the temple? (v12)

What does Darius say about the costs of building and articles for furnishing the temple? What does he say the consequences for stopping the temple project? (v11-12)

How do the opponents of Israel respond to Darius re-issuing Cyrus’ decree? (v13)

When you face opposition how do you respond? What can you learn from the Israelites experience and God’s response?

*Read Ezra 6:15-22.*

What stands out to you from this passage?

How do Israel celebrate the completion of the temple? (v16-18) What does this show about their relationship with God?

The book of Moses are the books that are thought to be mostly written by Moses (obviously Moses death was appended after he died in Deuteronomy). These are the first five books of the Bible, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy often today called the Pentateuch.

The priests are the descendants of Abraham and the only people authorised to offer sacrifices. The Levites are the descendants of Levi, one of the sons of Joseph and tribes of Israel. They are designated rather than to own land in their own tribal area to look after worship across all the tribes in Israel and are the tribe with designated roles in temple worship.

How do Israel celebrate the Passover?

The Passover celebrates the time that the Israelites sacrificed a lamb to God and ate it. They put its blood on their doorposts to tell God to pass over their houses, when he put the first born of all the Egyptians houses to death. This was the plague that God visited on the Egyptians that finally made the Pharaoh tell the Israelites to leave Egypt. It also looks forward to the sacrifice of Jesus as the lamb of God to redeem our sin.

Who eats the Passover? (v21) Why did Israel have to separate themselves from the Gentiles?

In what ways should we be different from non-Christians? Are we prepared to stand out from them?

What does the Passover show us about how God rescues his people? How does this point us to Jesus rescuing us?

Why are the people so full of joy? (v22) What does this show us about God’s power?

How do you celebrate a big achievement? Do we respond to success by worshipping our God?

What reasons do we have to be joyful? How do you express it when you are joyful?

Suggesed prayer points:

* Thank God that he has rescued us in Christ and that he looks over our lives and protects us now.
* Ask that we would take more and more joy in this, even when we face difficult circumstances
* Pray for any in the group that are facing opposition in their daily lives

# Study Four - Ezra 7 and 8

*Read Ezra 7:1-10.*

What strikes you from this passage?

Ezra’s ancestry is traced all the way back to the first officially appointed priest to Israel in Aaron. Aaron and his sons were the first appointed priests in Israel and God through Moses decreed that the priests would come from Aaron’s descendants only.

How is Ezra described? (v1-6, 10) What does his difference does his ancestry make?

How is the law described? (v6) Does remembering where the law came from help us read it?

Jesus says that he fulfils the law and that the law is about him. How does Jesus’ coming change how we read the law?

While today we think about the law as an inflexible set of rules to be followed, for the Israelites the law taught them how to relate to God. It could change depending on the changed circumstances and allowed for sacrifices so that their failings could be atoned for that looked forward to the ultimate sacrifice in Jesus. Some of the rules such as, “Be open handed toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land” (Dt. 15:11) are very much about how we are to seek to do positive things for people, which as they are so general are hard to interpret in real life. The law is supposed to be a reflection of loving your God and loving your labour. Therefore while clearly the sacrificial law has been fulfilled in Jesus, the principles that are behind the Israelite laws apply to our life today.

What does Ezra experience because of having God’s hand on him? How might we experience God’s hand upon us today?

God’s hand being on a person means that God is granting them favour. God’s hand being on Ezra means that the king grants Ezra all he asks for because God is intervening to make the king favourable to him.

What reason is given for God’s hand being with Ezra? (v10) What does this show us about teachers of scripture?

If we asked a friend what you are devoted to, what might they say? Would Jesus or scripture be mentioned at all?

How can we study scripture and apply it to ourselves?

*Read Ezra 7:11-28.*

What stands out to you?

What does the introduction and start of the letter say about Ezra? (v11) How does Artaxerxes describe himself? (v12)

What help does Artaxerxes decree be given to Ezra to help build the temple? (v15-22) What is the king’s motivation for this? (v23)

What job is Ezra given? (v25-26) What qualifies him for this role?

How does Ezra respond to the letter? Why? (v27-28)

What gave Ezra the courage to leave? (v28) How have we experienced God giving us courage today?

*Scan through Ezra 8:1-14. Read 8:15-36.*

Why might the Levites missing (see v15) be a problem? How does Ezra respond? (v16-20)

Why do some of the Levites not want to fulfil their role?

When are we similar to the Levites in preferring our comfort to serving God as we ought? How can we stay true to Christ at such times?

How does Ezra handle the money? (v24-34) How does he make sure that people are accountable for the money?

What does this show us about handling money for God’s people?

Why doesn’t Ezra ask the king for soldiers so they would have a safe journey? What does he do instead? (v21-23)

How does the fast help the Israelites pray?

Are the prayers of the Israelites answered? (v31-32) How do they respond? (v35-36)

Have you ever fasted? Should we fast today?

When do we praise God? When are there times that we can benefit from remembering to praise God?

Could all this have been achieved by Ezra alone? What does this show about how God’s people need each other?

How do you experience being a part of God’s people serving Him? What are the joys of doing so?

How do we experience the hand of God on us as his people?

Suggesed prayer points:

* Thank God that he is sovereign and that he wants the best for us and will work in our lives to achieve his purposes
* Ask that he would grant us favour and joy and help us to respond in praise to him.
* Pray that God would unite the people in the communities of which you are a part and help encourage all the people to contribute to serving him.
* Pray that we would be more concerned about serving God than our own comforts.

# Study Five – Ezra 9 and 10

*Read Ezra 8:35 to 10:1.*

What strikes you from this passage?

How has the Israelites situation changed from the start of the book?

How are the nearby nations described? (v1) How is Israel meant to be different? (v2)

What have the Israelites done wrong? Why is this so bad?

Which groups are particularly pointed out? How does this make it worse?

How do Ezra and others react? Why? (v3-4)

When does Ezra pray publicly about this? What elements make up his prayer?

How does Ezra describe God? How does Ezra describe the Israelites?

Why is intermarriage so bad? (v10-12) How does it threaten Israel’s identity as the people of God?

The objections to intermarriage were not about being racist and considering the Israelites a superior race. God is clear that is in no way the reason that he picked them as his people – in fact the reason given is closer to the opposite. (See Dt. 5 ) However intermarriage with people who worshipped other gods would drag people away from the one God. Balaam suggested that to the Moabites and the women seduced the Israelites into worshipping other gods. Similarly Solomon was led to worship other gods and build temples to them by his foreign wives. This worship of foreign gods that continued throughout the period of the first temple, sometimes encouraged by the foreign wives of kings such as Ahab’s wife, Jezebel who set out to eliminate worshippers of the one God. However, when a foreigner committed themselves to worshipping the one God, it was a totally different matter. They were then considered as an Israelite. Examples of this include Caleb (Numbers 32:12, Joshua 14:6,16, Rahab (Joshua 6:17, Matthew 1:5) and Ruth (Ruth 4)

How did committing such acts of intermarriage result in Israel’s present situation?

How is Israel’s existence a sign of God’s grace? (v13-15)

How would you describe Ezra’s response to Israel’s sin? What kind of leadership does Ezra demonstrate?

How do you react to sin? What can you learn from Ezra’s example?

*Read Ezra 10:1-17.*

What did you notice?

How do the Israelites respond to Ezra’s upset and prayer? (v1-4)

How do the Israelites respond to Shecaniah’s proposal? (v5-8) How does Ezra respond?

How do the people modify Shecaniah’s proposal? (v12-14) Is everyone on board with the plan? (v15)

Who is put in charge of investigating the cases? How does this represent all of the Israelites?

 What does this show us about how the church handles issues? What can we learn from this?

*Read Ezra 10:18-25, and then 43-44. Scan 26-42*

How widespread was the intermarriage? Were the leaders involved?

Who is emphasised at the start of the list? Why?

Why did having the religious leaders involved make the threat intermarriage caused to Israel’s identity so much worse?

What has changed for Christians? How are we in a different situation to Israel in the time of Ezra?

In what ways can having Jesus as central to our lives and living for him give us different priorities? How should they contrast to unbelievers?

What types of relationship should Christians be careful of with those who do not know Christ? Why?

It is clear that today a Christian having an unbelieving husband or wife is not a reason to separate from them. (1 Cor. 7:10-16) However, in such a relationship the couple should have different priorities as the Christian’s top priority should be for the whole family to be under God’s rule and in relationship with him. The unbeliever has no reason for this to be the case and so will have other priorities.

This also applies to certain other relationships that we may have where Scripture calls us to be careful with relationships with unbelievers to avoid them pulling us in different directions to those that God would take us in. This is particularly true in the church as 2 Cor. 6:14 – 7:1 makes clear. However, such care in relationships should be taken in marriage and we should certainly be aware that care needs applying to business and other relationships.

How might you seek to point out the difficulties of such relationships to someone thinking of entering into one? What are things you would want to avoid saying?

For the Israelites in Ezra’s time, keeping their separate identity meant the other people’s saw God in their lives. How should we as the people of God today be able to show the difference that it makes in our lives?

Suggested prayer points:

* Thank God that he does forgive us and welcomes us as children when we turn to him
* Pray for us as the people of God that we would be able to show the difference that this makes in our lives.
* Pray for anyone in the group that is struggling with an interdependent relationship of any sort with someone who does not believe.

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**Contact:** lucas.sharley@gmail.com