



RETURN

A Story of Redemption

“Return of the Exiles”

Week 1

Ezra 1:1-11

April 8, 2018

Icebreaker question. Let each person answer this question as we get to know each other: “What is your favorite T.V. show?”

Prayer (now or end of study). Spend some time sharing prayer requests, and have each person pray for the person on their left.

Studying the word. *Ask God to guide your study of His Word.*

OBSERVATION & INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS

Context & History: Cyrus became king of Anshan in 559 B.C. After various victories over kings of the Ancient Near East and Asia Minor, he took Sardis in 546 B.C. He fought with great success against the Babylonians in 539 B.C., and his general conquered Babylon in 539. “The first year of Cyrus” refers to the first year of the conquering of Babylon when he became king of Mesopotamia.

Also of note: the “70 years of Exile” does not refer to the time the Israelites spent in Babylon, because 539 is only 48 years after the deportation of the first temple. The “70 years of Exile” refers to the period between the destruction of the first temple and reconstruction of the second, 70 years later.

1. Have someone read Ezra 1:1-11.
2. What compelled Cyrus to send the Jews back to Jerusalem?
3. What does it mean for Cyrus to build The Lord a “house?” (Compare to 2 Samuel 7:5 for help).
4. How do you reconcile the interaction of God’s sovereign power and man’s free will? Cyrus is an example – he was a human being with his own will, and yet he was an instrument of God’s greater purpose.
5. What is the main idea of verses 6-11?

6. In verse 6, who assisted the exiles with goods for their return to Jerusalem?
7. How would you describe their gifts to the Jewish people?
8. Is there a connection between God's financial blessing and his spiritual purpose? Why or why not?
Read the following verses: Psalm 50:10, Philippians 4:19, Psalm 112:3, Psalm 24:1-2. What do we learn about God and money?
9. Finally, look up Proverbs 11:28. How should this verse caution us?

QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION

1. Do you believe that God is in charge of international politics? Do you believe he is in charge of the course of human history on a grand scale? How could believing this help you trust him?
2. How is God's sovereignty over human actors an encouragement? How does it give you hope?
3. Do you find it hard to trust God with money? Why or why not?
4. Do you know that God can give you what you need to accomplish his purposes?
5. What are some ways that you could grow in faith of trusting God with money?

“Return Isn’t Easy”**Week 2**

Ezra 4:1-24

April 15, 2018

Icebreaker question. Let each person answer this question as we get to know each other: “What is your favorite birthday memory?”

Prayer (now or end of study). Spend some time thinking of people in your places of work or community that could use prayer, and then lift them up to God.

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OBSERVATION & INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS

Summary of Chapter 3: The Jewish people returned to Jerusalem and established an altar, where they began to worship God according to the Law of Moses. After being there a year, they began to rebuild the temple as well. They even paid carpenters and masons to begin rebuilding the foundation of the temple...

1. Have someone read Ezra 4.
2. Why wouldn't the Jewish people allow the “adversaries of Judah and Benjamin” to help rebuild the temple?
3. What was the response of the “people of the land” (verse 4)?
4. Verse 6 tells the story of something that happened during Artaxerxes' reign (Ahasuerus is the same person as Artaxerxes). Where does this story fall chronologically compared to Cyrus and Darius reign? (You will need a study Bible to help you figure this out).
 - a. There is a long note in the leader's guide to help understand the chronology of these verses, and the reasoning. It is in the introduction to the leader's guide.
5. What do you observe in the letter that the adversaries sent to Artaxerxes?

6. What do you notice in the letter that was returned to the adversaries from Artaxerxes?
7. Do you think it is true that the Jewish people were "seditious and rebellious" in the past? Which parts of the letter seemed true to you... which parts seemed false?
8. Why does the Bible record the political intrigue regarding God's people and their adversaries?

QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION

1. How relevant is political power struggle to the kingdom of God today?
2. Philippians 3:18 says, "For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ."
 - a. How does knowing there are enemies of the cross shape your expectations on life?
 - b. How should we feel towards enemies of God?
 - c. What do we learn about how enemies of God will attack the church? Attack his people?
 - d. Can you think of any Scriptural teachings that give us hope against enemies of the cross?
 - e. How should we treat enemies of the cross?
 - f. What can we do to make sure our hearts do not become embittered toward God's enemies?
3. Have someone read 1 Peter 2:12. What can you do this week to obey this verse?

“Return to Work”

Week 3

Haggai 2:1-9

April 22, 2018

Icebreaker question. Let each person answer this question as we get to know each other: “What is your favorite restaurant?”

Prayer (now or end of study). Spend some time praying for youth and children. Pray for children you are related to (sons, daughters, grandchildren, etc.) Pray for local schools and school-districts.

Studying the word. *Ask God to guide your study of His Word.*

OBSERVATION & INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS

Historical Note: The book of Ezra records that Haggai prophesied to the returning exiles. So we are going to take one week to look at the message of Haggai.

1. Read Haggai 2:1-9 aloud.
2. In verse 3, Haggai asks them to compare the current temple with Solomon's prior temple, which was destroyed. Read Ezra 3:12. What is the difference between the new temple and the old temple?
3. Put yourself in their shoes. How would you be feeling as you embarked on the mission to build a new temple?
4. What commands does Haggai give as he prophesies to the exiles? (verses 4 and 5)
5. What promises does Haggai deliver to the people from God as they continue to work?
6. What do you notice about the work of the Spirit, even here in the Old Testament?
7. Assume for a moment that ultimate fulfillment of the prophecy in verses 6-9 is fulfilled in Christ.
 - a. How does that happen? Read 1 Corinthians 3:16.

- b. How is the reference to silver and gold being given to God from all the nations fulfilled in Christ?

QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION

1. What is the main work that God has called a Christian to, today?
2. When the Jewish people saw the foundation of the new temple compared to the old, they cried.
 - a. Are there times when you are convinced the future can never be as good as the past?
 - b. Is there any way that you mourn the state of the church today compared with the past?
 - c. How does a passage like this encourage you that God has a glorious future for his people even today?
3. Which of God's promises in this passage do you need to hear today? Why?
4. What particular task has God laid before you, for which he says to you, "Be strong! Do not fear! Work hard!"
5. What do we learn about God's character in this passage?

“Return Through The Help of Others” *Week 4*

Ezra 4:24-5:17, 6:13-18

April 29, 2018

Icebreaker question. Let each person answer this question as we get to know each other: “What characteristics do you admire (in self or others)?”

Prayer (now or end of study). Think about and pray for our national leaders, our state leaders, and our local leaders in government.

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OBSERVATION & INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS

Note: We are also going to look at Ezra 6:13-18.

1. Read Ezra 4:24 – Ezra 5:17.
2. Look carefully at Ezra 4:24. What key change resulted in the temple being rebuilt?
3. What role does Tattenai have over the land of Israel?
4. Compare Tattenai’s letter, recorded in verses 5:6-17, with the letter sent by the adversaries in 4:11-16.
 - a. Which letter seems more objective?
 - b. Which letter seems more truthful?
 - c. Who influenced the writing of the other letter? (4:6)
 - d. Who influenced the writing of the second letter? (5:4)
5. Now read Ezra 6:13-18.
6. What is the importance of the prophetic activity of Zechariah and Haggai? Look at 6:14.
7. Was the encouragement of Haggai and Zechariah essential to the completion of the project? Why or why not?
8. How did the people feel when their new temple was finished?
9. What do their sacrifices indicate about their attitude (6:17)?

QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION

1. When there is a contentious matter, what is the importance of truth and objectivity?
2. What is the importance of having rulers who will listen to truth?
3. How can you serve as an encourager to others as Haggai and Zechariah did?
4. The people rededicated themselves to the Law of Moses at 6:18. This shows that they learned the historical lesson, that if they abandon God they will go into exile, but if they turn back to God, he will heal their land.
 - a. Are there ways you need to rededicate yourself to God?
 - b. Are there commandments from God that you are not paying attention to?
5. What do we learn about God's character in this passage?

“Return of the Law”

Week 5

Ezra 7:1-10, 25-28

May 6, 2018

Icebreaker question. Let each person answer this question as we get to know each other: “Describe your closet.”

Prayer (now or end of study). Spend some time praising God. Praise him for any ways he has blessed you recently. Thank him for his forgiveness, his love, mercy, justice, creativity, omnipotence, goodness, provision, peace, holiness, sovereignty (control of all things), wisdom, faithfulness, grace, and anything else.

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OBSERVATION & INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS

1. What significant name do you see in Ezra's lineage?
2. What was Ezra's occupation (verse 6)?
3. What do we know about Ezra's heart and motivation? (verse 10)
4. How was Ezra uniquely qualified to teach God's commandments?
5. What power is given to Ezra in verses 25 and 26?
6. What is Ezra's response to Artaxerxes' decree? (verses 27-28)
7. Why was the teaching of God's commandments an essential part of the restoration of God's people and the temple?

QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION

1. Why is it important for God's people to know the Scriptures?
2. Ezra spread the work of teaching around to many people. Why is it important that the work of teaching the Scriptures is spread around among many?
3. Ezra had the combination of gifting, talent, and opportunity to serve God in a powerful way. What are some of the ways that God has gifted you and given you opportunity to serve him?

4. Do you think it right to punish those who do not follow the law of God (verse 26)? How do we reconcile that teaching with modern day democracy? How do we reconcile that teaching with Jesus' example?

Pastor's Note...

It is important to remember that ancient Israel was its own kingdom, and that there was no separation of church and state. The church provided the laws and ethical instructions, and the state enforced them.

We live in a different world today, and in many ways it is for the better. Jesus taught in a situation where his followers held no political power at all. Jesus never taught that the state should enforce his teachings. So under the New Covenant, in the age of the church, we do not see this practice to be necessary.

Even so, it is true that those who break God's law deserve punishment, so we do not find the teaching here to be false. Jesus taught that such judgment would take place at the end of time.

“Return Preparations”**Lesson 6**

Ezra 8:21-36

May 13, 2018

Icebreaker question. Let each person answer this question as we get to know each other: “What is your favorite activity to do on vacation?”

Prayer (now or end of study). Pray for the persecuted church worldwide. Lift up those meeting in homes or caves, who would lose jobs, homes, or family if their faith was discovered. Pray for wisdom and protection as they seek to witness Jesus to those around them. Pray for their continued faithfulness.

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OBSERVATION & INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS

Context: The first part of Ezra chapter 8 records how Ezra gathered all of the Jewish people he could from Babylonia to travel with him back to Jerusalem. Special attention was paid to make sure they had some Levites to serve at the temple.

1. Have someone read Ezra 8:21-36 aloud.
2. Why did Ezra and his men fast and pray for their journey?
3. How do you see Ezra's commitment to keep God's word in this passage?
4. Why didn't they ask for a military escort?
5. What valuable possessions would make them a target for the enemy? (verses 24-30)
6. Why did they make it safely, according to verse 31?
7. What do you notice about the numbers in this passage? What is their symbolic meaning?
8. In the absence of other details worth noting in this passage, why do you think this book of the Bible spends so much time talking about silver, gold, and wealth?

9. Anything else you notice about this passage that stands out to you?

QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION

1. There is a close connection in this passage between fellowship with God and receiving his protection. They fast, pray, and sacrifice, and the Lord rewards them.
 - a. How should a Christian employ this sort of real-world protection?
 - b. How does the Gospel teach us about receiving God's favor?
2. Would it have been wrong for Ezra to take a military escort? Why or why not?
3. Along those lines, Nehemiah stationed guards around the city 7:3. How do we know if we should take similar measures today?
4. What do you learn about God in this passage?
5. What do you learn about man?
6. What do you learn about the life that God desires for man?

“Return in Confession”**Lesson 7**

Ezra 9

May 20, 2018

Icebreaker question. Let each person answer this question as we get to know each other: “What are the best perks that you have ever had at a job?”

Prayer (now or end of study). Spend some time praying for each other's needs. Break up into groups of two or three and share with each other, and pray.

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OBSERVATION & INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS

1. What was the problem that the official alerted Ezra to? (verses 1-5)
2. How would you describe Ezra's emotion as he prayed to God?
3. Read Deuteronomy 7:3-4. Why did God give the command not to intermarry with foreigners...?
 - a. Was it about race? Why or why not?
 - b. What was the most important reason for Moses' original instruction?
 - c. Boaz married Ruth, a Moabitess. Did God smile on that? Why or why not?
4. In your own words, summarize how Ezra responded in verses 5-15.
5. What resulted from previous sins such as intermarriage with foreign women, according to Ezra 9:7?
6. What would result if they did not repent, according to Ezra 9:14?
7. What do you notice about Ezra's confession in this passage? How should this serve as instruction for us?

QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION

1. How do these marriage principles apply to a Christian today?
 - a. What should a Christian do if he is considering marriage to a non-Christian?
 - b. What should a Christian do if he is married to a non-Christian? In order to answer this, please look at 1 Corinthians 7:12-16.
2. What Hollywood, Disney, or other pop-culture narratives about love and marriage does this passage challenge?
3. Do you react like Ezra when you realize you have sinned? Why or why not?
4. How is God speaking to you through this passage?

“Return and Repentance”**Lesson 8**

Ezra 10

May 27, 2018

Icebreaker question. Let each person answer this question as we get to know each other: “What is the hardest thing you have ever done?”

Prayer (now or end of study). As we break for the summer, spend some time praying for each other to be equipped with the Lord's power. Open your Bibles to Ephesians 6:14-18 and pray God would give you the belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness, shoes of Gospel of peace, shield of faith, helmet of salvation, and sword of the Spirit.

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OBSERVATION & INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS

Here are a couple special notes on this particularly difficult passage.

The word for “marriage” in verse 2 is not the normal word for marriage, and may indicate that these were not proper marriages.

Malachi, who prophesied at the same time accuses the people of putting away their Jewish wives for forbidden foreign wives. It may be that this passage is in response to that. See Malachi 2:11, 14.

1. What stands out to you in this passage?
2. How does Ezra's behavior and prayer affect the Israelites?
3. Describe Ezra's condition as he is leading the people to repentance? What does he feel? What does he do?
4. By what means is the covenant made? Who must abide the proclamation?
5. Read Deuteronomy 7:3-4. What is God's heart towards his people not intermarrying?

6. Imagine the feeling of the foreign women and children in all this.
7. The people say in verse 14 that the fierce wrath of God is upon them. Does this refer to the rain? Something else? What do you think this means?
8. How long did it take the people to sort out who had married inappropriately? What does this indicate about the care that was given to the matter? Does it indicate anything about care for the foreigners or children? Why or why not?

QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION

1. How do these marriage principles apply to a Christian today?
2. Why does God care so much about who we marry?
3. How does our church deal with corporate breaches of conduct (breaches of conduct that affect the whole body)?
4. How can unchecked sin within a few people in a community affect the whole?
5. Anything else you learn in this passage?