

The New Inductive Study Series

OVERCOMING FEAR AND DISCOURAGEMENT

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EZRA

Rebuilding the Temple and Restoring the People

Ezra is one of the most encouraging books of the entire Bible. In your study of this book, you will see not only God's hand clearly moving in the affairs of men as He lovingly, fairly, and justly performs His purpose, but also how man responds to God's leading and instructions.

You will see God, through His prophets, announcing His future plans hundreds of years in advance; predicting the reigns of kings and kingdoms even before they exist; pre-declaring a precise time schedule that is kept to the very minute; and stirring the hearts of all kinds of people in order to accomplish His will.

In this study, you'll be warned of the penalties that result from disobedience. You'll be encouraged by the lifestyles of those who know His Word and keep it. You'll be comforted by

the overwhelming evidence that God continues to work mightily among His creation, regardless of man's responses. And at the same time, you'll be challenged to study His Word, learn His commandments, listen to His voice, and walk in His ways.

On the surface, Ezra appears to be a book about obedience—man's responsibility—but it has a deeper message about the unwavering faithfulness of a sovereign God whose commitment and compassion for His people never changes. His heart is to have an intimate relationship with His people—those who believe in Him. If that relationship is broken by our rebellion against His will, His passion is for the restoration of that relationship!

Ezra was a man who “had set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice *it*, and to teach *His* statutes and ordinances in Israel” (Ezra 7:10). Ezra's passion for knowing God caused even the nonbelievers of his day to recognize that “the good hand of his God *was* upon him” (Ezra 7:9). He understood the absolute necessity for man to know the Word of God and to respond appropriately to its commands. Ezra stated it this way: “The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him, but His power and His anger are against those who forsake Him” (Ezra 8:22b).

When we seek Him, He is favorably disposed. When we forsake Him, His power and anger are against us. Yes, He is there moving and working on our behalf. And yes, what we know and what we do does make a difference. Let's begin seeking Him through our study of the book of Ezra. Come study with me and experience His favor.

Week 1

Does It Really Matter What Choice I Make?

DAY ONE

Have you ever made a bad decision and felt like God had distanced Himself from you because of that incorrect choice? Have you ever wanted to just give up? To quit? Have you ever thought it would be impossible to get it all back together again?

Is there any hope? Any way out? Can your relationship with God and others be restored? Will God forgive you? Does God still want to have an intimate relationship with you?

God's answer to all of these questions is a resounding “Yes!”

Read Ezra chapter 1, asking the “5 W's and an H” kinds of questions. (You were instructed how to do this in the “How to Get Started” section on page 8. If you have not read that section, stop and do so now. It will be very helpful to you as you complete the daily assignments.)

You may have asked some questions such as the following:

Who is Cyrus, king of Persia?

Who is Jeremiah?

What did Jeremiah say that is now being fulfilled by Cyrus?

What “house” is God referring to that He has appointed Cyrus to rebuild for Him?

Why were all the articles from the house of the Lord carried away from Jerusalem and put in the house of Nebuchadnezzar’s gods?

Who is Nebuchadnezzar?

Who were the exiles? **Why** were they exiled?

Who sent them into exile? **When** did they go into exile? **How** long were they to be in exile?

Since the answers to some of these questions are not found in the text of Ezra itself, we will look for them in other books of the Bible. Discovering these answers will help us establish the historical setting in which the book of Ezra was written. All of your assignments this week are designed to help you lay a solid historical foundation not only for Ezra, but also for your future studies in the books of Nehemiah and Esther.

Let’s complete today’s time together by reviewing some basic biblical history that will help you understand the background of this book. This background will prove very helpful in understanding Ezra. We will clearly see why the Israelites went into captivity.

Let’s begin by seeing how the nation of Israel, the people who are in exile, came into being. First of all, God chose a man named Abram (later called Abraham) and promised him three things:

- 1) To give him a land (often referred to as “the Promised Land” and later to be called “Israel”)
- 2) To make him a great nation (later to be called the nation of Israel)
- 3) To give him a seed (Jesus Christ—Galatians 3:16) through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:1-3)

Abraham had a son named Isaac who had a son named Jacob. God changed Jacob’s name to “Israel.” Israel (the person from whom the land and the nation derived its name) had 12 sons who became the “12 tribes of Israel.”

Because of a famine in the land, the nation of Israel ended up in Egypt, in slavery to a pharaoh. God chose Moses to lead the children of Israel out of that bondage of slavery (see the book of Exodus) and eventually took the Israelites into the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua (see the book of Joshua). While en route to the Promised Land, God gave Moses the Ten

Commandments on Mount Sinai (Exodus 20). Later, He gave them some other laws, ordinances, and statutes that were designed to help them live their daily lives as a chosen nation for God (the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers).

During the time of Moses, God instructed him to build a portable tabernacle where the people could worship Him. God would also manifest His presence among the people in the form of a Shekinah glory cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. That cloud of glory would come down and rest or reside in the Holy of Holies section, which was a part of this tabernacle worship facility.

Many years later, the nation of Israel decided they wanted a king like all the other nations around them. God granted their request and gave them a king named Saul (1 Samuel 10). When Saul died, David became the king of all Israel (2 Samuel 2).

David wanted to replace the tabernacle with a more permanent place of worship, a “house for God.” He wanted to build a temple in Jerusalem, the capital of the nation of Israel. God would not allow David to build Him a temple, but allowed David’s son Solomon to do it (2 Samuel 7). Solomon completed the construction of the temple in 959 B.C. Then in 931 B.C., Solomon died and the united kingdom of Israel split into two kingdoms, the Northern and the Southern Kingdoms, over a dispute about taxation. The Northern Kingdom (Israel) was comprised of ten of the tribes of Israel, and the Southern Kingdom (Judah) had two tribes.

Look at the chart entitled ISRAEL’S DIVISION AND CAPTIVITY (page 25). Beginning with the date 931 B.C., locate these dates so that you may become familiar with this chart. This will help you understand Israel’s history in light of the book of Ezra.

Notice on the chart that the Northern Kingdom of Israel was taken into Assyrian captivity in 722 B.C. For centuries God had pleaded with the Northern Kingdom to turn from their idolatry and immorality, but they would not listen to His messengers. They made a choice which left God with no other choice but to punish them for their disobedience. Assyrian captivity was the consequence of their sin.

Now notice on the chart that the Southern Kingdom of Judah followed in the footsteps of its sister and was taken into Babylonian captivity. This captivity, however, was in three distinct sieges. The first siege was in 605 B.C., the second in 597 B.C., and the third in 586 B.C. Also notice on the chart that the captivity was to last 70 years beginning in 605 B.C., the time of the first siege. You will also see that Jerusalem was totally destroyed in 586 B.C., including the temple that Solomon had built and completed in 959 B.C.

What did the Southern Kingdom do that caused God to allow it to be taken into captivity by the Babylonians? Was it because of idolatry and immorality like the Northern Kingdom? Or was it for other reasons? We will look at that tomorrow.

DAY TWO

Today we will continue to look at the historical setting for the book of Ezra. Read Leviticus 25:1-7. This is one of the many ordinances or statutes that God set before the children of Israel. In your notebook, as briefly as possible, record the main points of God's instruction according to this ordinance. (See the "How to Get Started" section for an explanation of the notebook. It would be good to go back and read this section if you have skipped over it. It contains vital information that you'll need to benefit from this study.)

Now read Leviticus 26:27-35. Record in your notebook what God said He would do to the sons of Israel if they did not obey Him. Be sure to include in your list what would happen to their land and to their sanctuaries.

According to the passage you just read, disobedience to the clear instructions of God has severe consequences. Read Leviticus 26:40-45 and make a list of what God wanted the punishment to do in their hearts and attitudes. Pay particular attention to the long-range commitment to His people that God clearly states in this passage. Note what He says He will not do to His chosen people, the Israelites.

All the facts that you've just observed from these three passages will help you understand what the children of Israel had done wrong and why God had to discipline them. However, we have to gather some more information to make the picture totally clear. Tomorrow we will lay a few more foundation stones in this historical background.

DAY THREE

Read Jeremiah 25:1-12. Jeremiah was a prophet of God during the time when the Southern Kingdom was taken into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. As you read these verses, underline the phrase *you have not listened* with a red pen. (If you don't have a red one, use any color.) Also, make a list of the truths you learn from these verses. Make sure that you answer the following questions in your list:

Did the sons of Israel listen to Jeremiah? Did they obey what God had said through him?

Whom did God say He would send against them to destroy them and make their land desolate?

According to verse 9, how did God describe Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon?

What purpose was Nebuchadnezzar accomplishing for God?

How long would the children of Israel serve the king of Babylon?

When the end of the captivity came, what did God say He would do to the king of Babylon?

DAY FOUR

We've seen what law the Israelites failed to obey. We've seen what punishment God was forced to invoke. And we have seen whom God was going to use to discipline His chosen people. Now today let's see how God's servant, Nebuchadnezzar, executed the judgment of God.

Read 2 Chronicles 36:11-21. In your notebook, record the answers to the following:

What do you learn about God from this passage?

What do you learn about Zedekiah, the king, all the officials of the priests, and the people?

What happened to the house of God, to all its articles, and to the wall of Jerusalem?

What happened to those who escaped the sword?

DAY FIVE

Obviously the children of Israel had disobeyed many of God's ordinances, statutes, and laws, but specifically they had disobeyed the one regarding the sabbath rest for the land. For 490 years they had not allowed the land to rest every seventh year, thus the accumulated time of rest due the land was 70 years. God would send His people into Babylonian captivity to collect that which was due. But what would happen when the 70 years were over? What would God do then?

Today, read Jeremiah 29:1-14. In your notebook, make a list of God's promises from these verses and answer the following:

- What does He promise for those who seek Him?
- Is He through with the children of Israel?
- What does He tell them to do even in the midst of their time of punishment?
- Does He have a future plan for them?
- Once the punishment for sin is complete, what is God's desire for His children?

Now then, think about each of these questions and apply it personally to your own relationship with God. For example, what does God promise you if you seek Him? If you do sin and disobey God, is He through with you? Are you to pray to Him in the midst of your chastisement? Does He leave you during this time of punishment? Does God have a future plan for you? Is restoration His desire for you?

In light of what you have learned from the Word of God, if you sin, is it over? Finished? What is your part?

DAY SIX

Today, read Isaiah 44:24-45:7. Mark every reference to Cyrus in a distinctive way by drawing a circle around his name and any pronoun that refers to him. Observe what you learn about him. What would Cyrus do? Make a list of these facts in your notebook.

Isaiah spoke this prophecy regarding Cyrus 175 years before Cyrus was even born! God was raising up another servant to perform His will in the history of man! In 539

B.C. Cyrus, king of Persia, and Darius the Mede, conquered Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and set the stage for the release of the children of Israel.

With all the information you gained this week about the historical setting, read 2 Chronicles 36:22,23 and Ezra 1:1-4. Now you can see that Ezra is a continuation of the story about the children of Israel, God's chosen people.

To end today's assignment and this week's homework, you need to do one more thing. Go back to Day One and review the questions that came out of Ezra chapter 1 to see if you answered them all. Review your lists in your notebook for the answers.

DAY SEVEN

Store in your heart: Jeremiah 29:11. Read and discuss: Ezra 1; Leviticus 25:1-7; 26:27-35, 40-43; Jeremiah 29:10-14; Isaiah 44:24-45:7.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR INDIVIDUAL STUDY

- Who took the Northern Kingdom into captivity? What year did that occur?
- What were the dates of the three stages of the Babylonian captivity?
- How long did the Babylonian captivity last? Under what siege did the time of captivity begin?
- In Leviticus 25:1-7, what did God tell the children of Israel to do with the land they were promised and were about to enter?
- According to Leviticus 26:27-35, what did God say He would do if the children of Israel disobeyed this ordinance? What will God do to you if you disobey His ordinances?
- According to Jeremiah, how long would the captivity last? What would God do at the end of this period of time?
- Did God fulfill Jeremiah's prophecy regarding the destruction of Jerusalem?
- What did you learn about the character of God from Leviticus 26:40-43? What must the people of Judah do for the sin of disobedience? What must you do if you sin?
- From Jeremiah 29:10-14, what did God promise the children of Israel He would do at the end of the 70 years of captivity? What kind of plans does God have for His children? In these verses God promises that when they call to Him, He will "listen" to them. How does this compare to what they would not do when God sent His prophets? Are you listening to God?

- When you read Isaiah 44:24–45:7, what did you learn about Cyrus? When was this prophecy given to Isaiah? When did Cyrus, king of Persia, conquer Babylon? How many years are between those two events?
- According to Ezra chapter 1, did God do what He said He would do, when He said He would do it?
- What are the consequences of disobedience?
- Does God discipline those who disobey? Is His discipline always immediately after the act of disobedience?
- Does God still discipline His followers who disobey? Whom could He use in His discipline? Believers? Unbelievers? Both?

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

God has given us the Bible so that we may know His commandments, statutes, ordinances, and laws. If we know His Word, we can obey it! The more we know and understand His principles and precepts, the more likely we will be to make the right choices. Our responsibility is to know His Word, choose to trust Him in what He says, and choose to obey what He tells us to do.

God has also given us the Holy Spirit to lead us, guide us, and teach us all things. God has given us everything we need in order for us to know what He wants us to do, to think, and to say. Our problem is that sometimes we just make bad decisions. Sometimes it's because we don't know any better. Sometimes it's because we just want to do what's right in our own eyes. We know what to do, but we just choose not to do it. Sometimes we just don't "listen" to His voice or to those messengers He sends our way.

God will go to great lengths to bring us back to the point of obedience. Sometimes He uses unbelievers to accomplish His will. He loves us enough to create and destroy kings and kingdoms and even move us from place to place, if that is what it takes to get us to listen. He faithfully does His part. He desires fellowship with us... whatever the cost on our part or His. His desire is that we confess our sin, change our mind about what we have done, turn from that type of behavior, and return to a life of obedience. Even when we've made a bad choice, we can still make the right choice.

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