

The Book of Ezra

Listed Scriptures

Ezra 3, 9, 10

Lesson Aim

- 1) That the students may understand the historical background of the return of the Israelites in exile
- 2) That the students may understand the importance of the power of God in building (rebuilding) His temple
- 3) That the students may understand the importance of marrying within the Lord

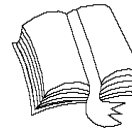
Memory Verse

"This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: 'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the Lord of hosts." (Zech 4:6)

Bible Reading For This Week (for students and teachers)

Ezra 3, 9, 10

B I B L E B A C K G R O U N D



The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are thought to be originally one volume. These books record the post-exilic return of the Jews. From the time of Origen (3rd century), they were divided as we have them today.

The Persian emperor, Cyrus, having conquered the Babylonian Empire in 539 B.C., gave the Jews permission to return to the land of Israel to rebuild the temple. Apparently, the repairs on the temple did not take place immediately after the post-exilic return. It was not until 520 B.C., when Zerubbabel was governor of the province of Judea, that the temple building work was in full swing. Zerubbabel, encouraged by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, resumed the work of building the temple, with the permission of King Darius. The work was finished in 515 B.C. (Ezra 6:15).

Zerubbabel brought the first group of Jews back to the land of Israel. The work by Zerubbabel is recorded in Ezra 1–6. Ezra was the leader of the second group, and he contributed greatly to the revival of faith of the Israelites. The work by Ezra is recorded in Ezra 7–10.

Ezra returned to Judah in the seventh year of Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:7). There are two possibilities with regard to the year. It could be the year 458 B.C., during the reign of Artaxerxes I. Or, it could be during the reign of Artaxerxes II, which then makes the year of Ezra's return 397 B.C.

If the date of Ezra's work is around the year 458 B.C., Ezra should be a contemporary of Nehemiah. It is baffling that Nehemiah is never mentioned in the book at all. Various biblical scholars have attempted different analyses to solve this conundrum of dates. The various theories are not mentioned here because the contents, especially the teachings of the two books (Ezra and Nehemiah) are not affected by the problem of dating the books.

Note, however, that Nehemiah mentions Ezra's work in his records. It is generally accepted that Nehemiah came to Jerusalem in 445/444 B.C. So, it is likely that Ezra's return was around the year 458 B.C., during the time of Artaxerxes I.

W A R M U P



From the last two lessons, we learned about how the Israelite kingdoms of Israel and Judah were taken into captivity, respectively, by the Assyrians and Babylonians in 722 B.C. and 586 B.C. The Bible does not have a lot of records about what life was like for the Israelites in captivity. However, we know that after the Persians conquered the Babylonians, the Persian kings were kind to the Israelites in that they allowed them to return to their land and rebuild the temple and city walls. In this lesson and the next, we will take a look at how the Israelites rebuilt their temple and city walls. From the difficulties they faced, the way they handled the setbacks and how God guided them, it is hoped that we can find relevance to apply to our life of faith today.



Part 1

The First Return (Ezra 1-6)

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are thought to be originally one volume. These books record the post-exilic return of the Jews after 70 years of captivity. Ezra records two batches of Israelites who returned to Jerusalem. The first group was led by Zerubbabel and Joshua the priest. They completed the work of rebuilding the temple of God. The second group was led by Ezra, who was known to be a scribe. He played a pivotal role in reviving the faith of the Israelites. As such, we can divide the book of Ezra into two main sections:

- a) The first return (chs 1 – 6)
- b) The second return (chs 7 – 10).

- a. The decree of Cyrus (Ch 1)
God moved Cyrus the Persian king to give permission to the Israelites to return to their homeland, and to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. Cyrus also commanded the return of all the treasures and articles which were taken from the house of the Lord by King Nebuchadnezzar when the Babylonians attacked Judah. Sheshbazzar was commissioned to go with the Israelites and was made the governor of Judah. We can see the hand of God in history, and especially in the history of His people. His mighty hands rule over even the strongest kings on earth (Read Prov 21:1 – "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, like the rivers of the water; He turns it wherever He wishes.")
- b. The Israelites return to their homeland (2–3:7)
Under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Joshua, about 43,000 Israelites went back to Jerusalem in this first return (about 537 B.C.). A census was taken, according to the tribes, and those whose parentage could not be ascertained as being of the priesthood were not permitted to be priests. They also started to offer sacrifices and kept the festivals.
- c. Rebuilding the temple (Chs 3–6)
 - 1. Laying the foundation (3:7–13): On the second month of the second year, the Israelites began work on the temple. First, they had to lay the

foundation. When the builders laid the foundation of the temple, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets and the Levites had cymbals, and they praised the Lord. Many of the old men, who had seen the old temple (before the captivity) wept as the foundation was laid.

2. Obstacles arose (4): Some enemies of the Israelites got wind of the rebuilding of the temple and sought the Israelites out, offering to join them in the temple building. Zerubbabel and the rest of the leaders rejected them, saying that they would not have a part in the building of God's temple. In consequence, these adversaries turned and plotted against the Israelites. They created trouble by reporting to Cyrus (and even later, Darius) that the Israelites planned to start their own nation and stop paying tribute to the Persian king. The work of rebuilding the temple was halted when the king believed these lies and passed a decree to stop the work. A lapse of fifteen years ensued thereafter.
3. The work resumed (5:1–5): When they faced obstacles in building the temple, the Israelites thought that it was not the timing of God yet, and turned their attention to rebuilding their own lives. They became far more concerned about building their own houses instead of the temple of God (Hag 1:2, 7–9). God inspired the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, to speak to the people. Through the encouragement of these two prophets, the Israelites decided to resume the work of building the temple again. In the second year of King Darius (520 B.C.), they started work again. This time, by the grace of God, the work progressed without hindrance.
4. Help from King Darius (5:6–6:12): At the petition of the governor of the region where the Israelites dwelled, Darius conducted a search of the archives and found records of King Cyrus' decree that allowed the Israelites to rebuild the temple. He therefore passed a decree that no one should hinder the work and that expenses of the rebuilding should be paid to the Israelites from the tributes and taxes received in the region.
5. The completion of the rebuilding of the temple (6:13–22): In the sixth year of Darius, the Israelites completed the rebuilding of the temple and even observed the Feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread.



Part 2

The Second Return (Ezra 7-10)

- a. Ezra, the scribe who was full of zeal (7:1–10)
Ezra was a priest descended from Aaron (7:2–7). He belonged to the family of Seraiah, whom Nebuchadnezzar had killed (2 Kgs 25:18–21). When Seraiah cleaned out the temple, he got hold of the Book of the Law. Hence, Ezra had the opportunity to study the word of God and became a scribe learned in the teachings of God. In the seventh year of Artaxerxes, he led another group of Israelites back to the land of Israel.
- b. Help from the palace (7:11–28)
Artaxerxes gave full support to Ezra's endeavor. He not only gave permission for the Israelites to return to their land; he also provided for their traveling expenses and gave tax exemption to those belonging to the family of the Levites (who were the priests). From this, the special providence of God is evident.
- c. The safe return by the help of God (8)
Before they set off, Ezra gathered all those who were returning by the river that flows to Ahava and camped there for three days. He found out that there were no Levites among the would-be returnees. In order that there would be people to tend to the affairs of the temple, he sent men to search for Levites and the Nethinim. (Nethinim refers to the group of people appointed to help the Levites in the service of the temple, see 8:20.) The journey they were about to embark on was long and arduous. He had not asked the king for an escort of horses and soldiers. So, Ezra led the people in fasting and prayer for God's abidance. Four months later, Ezra, together with more than one thousand seven hundred men, arrived in Jerusalem, with all the articles for the temple as well as the gold and silver. Even though they had not relied on any special human protection along the journey, they arrived safely. Hence, we see the providence of God yet again.
- d. Prayer of penitence on behalf of the people (9)
Upon returning, Ezra learned soon enough that the people of God had intermarried with pagan women, and the leaders of the tribes were the ones who transgressed most severely in this. He was grieved and took it upon himself to pray to God for forgiveness. Other than offering such intercessory prayers, he

also encouraged the people of God not to continue in this trespass (read Deut 7:3, 4). Ezra understood that to marry and join the gentiles in their ways was a great sin in the sight of God. Today, we are also the chosen people of God. Let us not follow in the footsteps of the Israelites who went and followed the ways of their pagan spouses.

- e. Cutting ties with their pagan wives (10)
All the Israelites gathered together before Ezra, and they realized their sin in marrying pagan wives and following in their ways. They wept for their sins and vowed to cut their ties.
- f. Conclusion
The return of God's chosen people to the land God had promised them shows us that God's promises are steadfast. Through it all, God's providence and grace never departed from them. In the process of rebuilding the temple, we see that they faced a lot of difficulties and obstruction. Nevertheless, they did not give up and the work was finally completed. It is the same for us today as we try to build up the church of God. After the physical temple had been rebuilt, there was still the need for Ezra to lead the people in rebuilding the temples that were within themselves, i.e., their spirituality. We see that the Israelites were quick to repent and mend their ways. This is something we ought to emulate today, as we strive to build our spirituality, as each of us is a temple of God.

C H E C K F O R U N D E R S T A N D I N G



1 Who first led the people of God back to the land of Israel/Judah to rebuild the temple?

2 What did this first batch of people bring back with them to Jerusalem?

3 Why was the work of rebuilding the temple halted for a long time?

4 When Ezra led the people of God back to Jerusalem, what was the big sin he discovered among the people?

5 What did the people do to show their repentance?

L I F E A P P L I C A T I O N



Part A- ***The Importance of Marrying Within the Lord***

In the book of Ezra, we see how Ezra was grieved that the people of God had married pagan women, for it was not the will of God that His people should intermarry with people who did not regard God as their God. Besides, the gentiles were often from evil and idol-worshipping nations. Today, the will of God has not changed. It is important that we recognize the importance of our status as the children of God. We are the salt and light of this world, to bring non-believers to know God. We should never go after the ways of people who do not know Him, especially people whose conduct and outlook on life run contrary to the teachings of God. We should strive to marry within the Lord, for marriage with non-believers often brings people away from God. It is very hard to maintain a life of service to God while trying to simultaneously maintain a marriage with someone who is not of the same faith.

Here are two case studies on the topic of marriage with non-believers. These stories are adapted from real stories, but the names have been changed. As we read their stories, try to put ourselves in the shoes of these believers. Then, as a class, discuss the questions that follow.

Case 1

Ken was baptized as an infant. As he was growing up, he went through well-structured religious education both at home and in church. As a teenager, he was one of the best students in his RE classes, knowing the Bible very well. He showed great respect for the elderly and was a good influence on the younger kids in church. When he was in college, he was even a leader in his campus fellowship. After graduation, he worked for a year before going on to graduate school. It was there that he got to know Ashley, who was a Christian from another denomination.

Their friendship developed into a romantic relationship and Ken knew that he had to try to bring Ashley to our church. Out of her love for him, Ashley accompanied him to our church services on the Sabbath. She was not used to our mode of prayers at first but soon got accustomed to it. She even enjoyed some of our sermons, which she found were true to biblical teachings. However, she could not bring herself to accept our church doctrines. Whenever Ken was with her, he found it hard to bring doctrinal issues into their conversation as it would always end in some form of tension or disagreement. Ken decided that all he could do was to pray for her.

When the church members started to see that Ashley was more than just a friend to Ken, they started to feel that Ken had “regressed” in his faith. Such an attitude was no help at all for Ashley to feel accepted in the church. Some sisters tried to talk with her, but somehow, being Ken’s girlfriend, the conversations remained superficial and cordial. She only continued to join Ken in attending our services because of her love for him, but deep inside her, she felt like a stranger in the church.

After Ken and Ashley got married, the situation continued for two more years. However, Ashley’s sense of alienation did not go away, and Ken could really sense it. Her unhappiness in coming to our church, coupled with the increasing responsibilities of life after marriage, finally led Ashley to decide that she would go back to her own church. Soon, Ken tried to make peace and often joined the community of the other church and today, he does not even come to our church services.

Questions to think about:

1. *It is said that affairs of the heart are beyond one’s control. Do you think Ken could have avoided getting himself romantically involved with Ashley? Explain your answer.*
2. *Were there telltale signs for Ken that Ashley might not ultimately come to accept the doctrines of salvation, even though he tried really hard and she tried her best to come with him to church?*
3. *If there had been greater support from church members, do you think Ken and Ashley would have become a happy couple in our church today? What are some of the things they did not handle well? What are some things they could have done, which they did not do?*
4. *After their marriage, what could Ken have done differently so that Ashley would not have led him away from the faith?*

Case 2

Mandy was brought up to know that she should strive to marry in the Lord. However, she had always wondered in her mind if she would ever find her spouse in church. She knew she was not the prettiest or smartest girl in church, and somehow, all the happily married couples seemed to be perfect matches. She felt she just didn’t fit in. But, she hoped to be married in church someday.

When she was of marriageable age, she started to feel as if her fears were coming true. One by one, she saw her peers getting married, and it seemed as though she was the only one left. So, one day, when one of her non-believing boyfriends started to show interest in her, she found it really hard to turn him down. After all, she didn’t want to end up all alone.

After a short courtship, she married her non-believing friend. She made some points very clear though. She told her husband that she would like to continue worshiping God in the True Jesus Church after marriage, and that their children had to be baptized in our church. He agreed to it all.

Today, Mandy has been married for eight years. Her two children are baptized. Unfortunately, they come to services an average of once or twice a month. Her children do not enjoy being in the children classes at all because they do not know anything about the Bible stories that the teacher teaches. Mandy often wonders if things could have been better had she not married her husband, for there were simply too many things that they could not connect at the emotional and spiritual levels.

Questions to think about:

1. *While we often hear people say “you should have faith” or “just pray and God will send you a spouse,” we know that fears of loneliness and peer pressure can be strong forces for those who cannot seem to find someone from church. Imagine yourself in the shoes of Mandy before she met her husband.*
 - a. *What were some of her fears?*
 - b. *Are those fears legitimate?*
 - c. *How could she have overcome such fears?*
2. *If you were friends with Mandy, what would you have done for her so as to circumvent what ultimately happened?*
3. *What were some things that Mandy could have done in order to bring her husband and children to know the true God?*

Final Thoughts

We know that it is a very risky thing for us to even consider marrying non-believers. It is almost like playing with fire in our life of faith. Unfortunately, today, we still see many youths getting married to people outside of the faith. A small portion of these youths managed to bring their spouses to the Lord. But the majority of them

were simply led away. As high-school students, we are definitely not of marriageable age yet. So, such an issue may seem too far in our future for us to think seriously about now. However, it is important that we develop certain principles in our lives at a young age. Otherwise, we will be easily swayed by the many ideas in the world. May God guide all of us, that we will be preserved in His saving grace.

Part B- Building Up the Temple of God That Is Within Me

In the book of Ezra, we see that Ezra resolved to study and teach the word of God (7:10). The people were also diligent in listening to Ezra when he taught. Then they immediately carried out what they knew were the right things to do. These are all very important factors in the rebuilding of the temple.

1 Corinthians 6:19, 20 says, "Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's." Today, what are you doing to build up the temple of God that is inside you? Write down at least four ways in which you can build up the temple of God, that is YOU! After writing down four ways to build up the temple of God within you, share them with your class.

R E F L E C T I O N & P R A Y E R



"For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel" (Ezra 7:10). This is a very inspiring verse. Ezra resolved to commit himself to study the word of God, and not only that, he wanted to actually do it and also to teach it! How many of us have ever made such a resolution? We put in a lot of time and energy into our studies at school, but do we also strive to study and know the word of God well? How about bringing what we know about God's teachings into our daily lives? And on top of that, do we teach the word of God by sharing with others and leading by example? How else can we teach the word of God?