

Ezra the Scribe

Listed Scriptures

Ezra 1-11; Neh 8-9

Lesson Aim

- 1) To imitate the determination and work spirit of Ezra.
- 2) To have high goals for the kingdom of God.

Memory Verse

"But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night." (Ps 1:2)

Bible Reading For This Week (for students and teachers)

Isaiah 46-50

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



Author and date written:

Not stated, but probably Ezra; around 450 B.C.

Historical background:

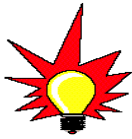
God's chosen people had sinned. They had turned to false gods and violated God's Sabbath. Although the Lord sent His prophets time and time again to warn the people of God's impending wrath, their words fell on deaf ears. In the year 605/6 B.C., the Lord allowed the Babylonians to crush the nation and tear the people away from the Promised Land. In a series of three deportations the Jews were taken to Babylon where they remained for 70 years (C.f. Jer 29:10). After the period of captivity was over, God remembered His covenant and in 537 B.C., when the great Babylon fell to the Medo-Persians, God stirred the heart of King Cyrus of Persia to allow His people to return to Jerusalem.

The return took place in three stages. Ezra 1-6 talks about the first return to Israel in 537 B.C. The leader of the first group was a man called Zerubbabel (his Hebrew name) or Sheshbazzar (his Chaldean name: see Ezr 5:16). He and the high priest, Jeshua, guided the people back to their homeland to rebuild the temple. They began to build the altar and the temple foundations (Ezr 3). But due to opposition, the project was halted for about 15 years (Ezr 4). During this time the prophets Haggai and Zechariah encouraged the people to complete the work (Ezr 5). King Darius finally decreed that the work should proceed unhindered.

Ezra 7-10 talks about the second return which took place some 80 years later. In the seventh year of Artaxerxes Longimanus, about 57/8 years after the completion of the temple, Ezra led the second group of some 1,754 men and their families back to Palestine where he restored the faith of the people.

The third return to Jerusalem occurred in the 20th year of King Artaxerxes' (465-424 B.C.) reign. Nehemiah led a group of exiles back to Jerusalem to rebuild the city walls, which still laid in ruins since the Babylonian invasion. Within 52 days, Nehemiah completed the rebuilding of the city walls and gates and he made many religious reforms.

W A R M U P



It's Up To You

One song can spark a moment
One flower can wake the dream
One tree can start a forest
One bird can herald spring
One smile begins a friendship
One handclasp lifts a soul
One star can guide a ship at sea
One word can frame the goal
One vote can change a nation
One sunbeam lights a room
One candle wipes out darkness,
One laugh will conquer gloom
One step must start each journey
One word must start each prayer
One hope will raise our spirits,
One touch can show you care
One voice can speak with wisdom

One heart can know what's true
One life can make the difference
You see, it's up to you!

By Catherine Manceaux

B I B L E S T U D Y



Part 1

Ezra's Resolutions

Throughout history God has used common people to change the world. The first disciples of Jesus Christ were unassuming, mostly uneducated, untrained men and women who made strong resolutions for God's kingdom. Today we will study about Ezra, a man who had a great determination to help his people in their darkest and desolate time. Ezra means help or my helper. Ezra 7 tells us that Ezra was from a priestly lineage and was a descendant of Aaron the high priest (7:1-5). His father was Seriah. Ezra was also a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses (7:6), commandments of the Lord, and statutes of Israel (7:11). He was born in Babylon at a time when the kingdom of Judah had been destroyed for a long time and the people were made captives in a foreign land. While in Babylon, God commanded the exiles to build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters. God wanted the people to move ahead with their lives and to settle in Babylon. When seventy years was completed God would visit them and bring them back to Israel (Jer 29:4-6; 10). Although in a foreign land, Ezra provides for us many valuable lessons on how to preserve our faith and do extraordinary works for God.



A He Resolved to Learn the Word of God

Ezra was born in Babylon during the captivity. He had never been to Israel. In other words, Babylon was his home. But unlike the many young Jews at the time, Ezra was not assimilated into the culture, practices and religion of the

Babylonians. Rather, he held onto his faith and Jewish identity despite his environment. Ezra did not merely hold onto his faith, he became a man of the faith in a foreign land. We may have similar backgrounds as Ezra. On the one hand, we are born into Christian families, but on the other we are faced with the world's trends and influences. In order to maintain our identity, we have to understand our precious status and spiritual lineage (1 Pet 2:9). Not only should we hold onto our faith, we should be active witnesses for Christ.

Ezra studied the word of God with a certain attitude—he studied it with faith. When the kingdom of Judah fell, it seemed that God's laws were no longer relevant. To devote time and effort to learning God's law in a foreign land may have seemed futile to many, but Ezra had faith in God and His promises. He believed that the Lord would fulfill His promise to visit His people after seventy years and restore them back to their homeland (Jer 25:12; 29:10; Dan 9:2). He showed such conviction and reverence in God's laws that even the king respected the laws of God (Ez 7:11-26). Sometimes it seems as if we read the Bible to no avail. We do not see how it applies to our lives. But if we study with faith and believe the Bible to be truly the word of God that can instruct us for salvation we will be blessed (2 Tim 3:15).

Reflection:

1. How did Ezra manifest his faith?
2. What was Ezra's attitude towards learning the laws of God?

 **B • He Resolved to Perform the Word of God**

The Bible specifically mentions that Ezra not only studied the word of God, he resolved to do it. True understanding of the word of God involves putting it into practice and experiencing it (Jn 7:17; Js 1:22-25). Had Ezra just resolved to study the word of God, neither he nor his people would have profited from it (Js 2:14-17). Romans 2:13 says, "For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified." Often we listen to sermons as if at a concert. The sermon, like music, will move us for a while, but it has no real impact upon our lives (Lk 7:32). To truly benefit from God's words we need to practice it.

Reflection:

1. Why is it that God blesses the doers of the word of God and not the listeners?
2. Have you ever done something purely because you wanted to obey God's word even though you did not feel like it? What were your thoughts?

 **C • He Resolved to Teach the Law of God in Israel**

Ezra recognized that God sent the Israelites into captivity because they did not follow His laws. Ezra identified the problem and to prevent the people from committing the same sin, he resolved to study the law and educate his people. Ezra was a problem-shooter. He knew where the breach was and he made it his duty to do something about it. Did Ezra have to leave Babylon? No. He could have let others deal with it. Instead Ezra made it his duty to help his people. This meant having to leave Babylon to suffer all kinds of hardships. Sometimes when we encounter problems we react like an ostrich and pretend we did not see the problem, or we let others deal with it. Ezra sets us a good example of shouldering the responsibility even if it means giving up things that are important to us. Today, do we have the heart of Ezra who was willing to suffer for the sake of his brethren? Are we willing to take the initiative to help those in need in the church? One such member who did was a brother who took it upon himself to study sign language so that he could sign the sermons for a believer who was deaf. Nobody asked the brother to do this, but because he saw the need of the believer, he willingly stretched out a helping hand.

Reflection:

1. What resolutions did Ezra make?
2. What resolutions have you made in your faith?
3. When there is a need in the church, are you most likely to jump up and volunteer your services, wait to be drafted or hide in the woodwork?



Part 2
Ezra's Work

 **A • He Led the People Back to the Homeland**

After Ezra decided to return to Jerusalem he called together those who wanted to return. Among the 1,754 people, there were priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers and temple servants (Ezra 7:7) as well as many possessions and livestock. Their journey was an extremely dangerous one. For four months they had to trek for 900 miles on foot through wilderness terrain (Ez 7:8-9).

Besides making physical preparations for the journey, Ezra made spiritual prepa-

rations too. He knew that the journey would be a dangerous one. It would have been legitimate for Ezra to ask the king for a military escort for protection, but Ezra did not want the people to rely on the arm of flesh but on God (2 Chron 32:7-8). Ezra led the people to beseech the help of God through fasting and praying. Ezra was thus a spiritual leader. He led the people in the right direction, which was towards God. This principle applies to our work in church and even in the family. As an RE teacher, choir conductor, youth leader, or even an older brother or sister, our attitudes and our faith will directly influence those whom we are responsible for. If as a leader we emphasize prayer, our RE class or our family members will emphasize on prayer. If we are non-committal about everything, then others will be too.

Reflection:

1. If you are an RE leader, a choirmaster, or a youth leader of some sort, reflect on how you have led others. Do you lead others to God?

B. He Summoned All the Levites

Not long into their journey, Ezra discovered that no Levites were among the group. These men were important to the service of the God yet they were unwilling to go when their services were needed. Ezra therefore sent men to encourage the Levites to join them. Consequently, 220 men rose up (Ez 8:17-20). Ezra demonstrated good leadership skills; he did not force the Levites to return, but he aroused their sense of responsibility. There may be brothers and sisters who are weaker in faith, who feel they do not have the talents, or who are not eager to participate in the divine work. Instead of disregarding them altogether, we need to encourage and inspire them to do the work together.

C. He Publicly Calculated the temple Treasures

When the people had decided to return, the king with his counselors and all of Israel offered much gold, silver, and vessels to be brought back to Jerusalem. There were 650 talents of silver, silver vessels worth a hundred talents, a hundred talents of gold, twenty bowls of gold worth a thousand darics, two vessels of fine bright bronze. Ezra then appointed twelve of the leading priests to make an inventory of all the treasures and to safe-guard them until they got to Jerusalem (Ex 8:24-30). Why did Ezra go to such pains to count the temple treasures?

By counting the vessels, Ezra was making a distinct separation of things that belonged to God. Ezra made it known that every object used in temple service

was set apart for God; they were considered holy treasures to be guarded with special care. This teaches us that we cannot take the things of God for our own personal use. The vessels of God need to be used only for purposes of serving God. Judas Iscariot is a good example of someone who did not differentiate between the things that belonged to him and the things that belonged to God (Jn 12:6).

Ezra further teaches us to be meticulous when doing church work. We need to take special care of whatever God has entrusted to us. If God has entrusted us to manage the accounts for the youth group for example, we need to be careful that every cent is accounted for and used for God. The vessels can also represent the believers who are vessels of God (2 Tim 2:20-21). As RE teachers, or youth group leaders, God has entrusted the brothers and sisters to our care. We need to know exactly who our sheep are and be accountable for each one of them.

By giving a clear account of all the treasures, Ezra prevented possible future misunderstandings. Although Ezra was honest and upright, he would probably have been a prime suspect had the treasures been stolen. Ezra therefore used wisdom and good judgment in all his doings. He made sure that he stood blameless in front of men and God (2 Cor 8:20-21; Ac 11:27-30).

Among the old Chinese folk songs, there is one called the "Song of the Gentlemen," which contains the following lines: "A gentlemen must prevent possible troubles and not place himself under suspicious circumstances. He is not to fasten his shoe lace in a melon field, or adjust his hat under a plum tree." This means that a gentleman's actions must be respectable and he should behave such that his conduct does not give rise to misunderstanding. When he walks by a melon field, he is not to fasten his laces even if they have come loose. When he passes a ripe plum tree, he is not to raise his hands to adjust his hat even if it has become crooked. In this way, no one will accuse him of trying to steal melons and plums.

Reflection:

1. When Ezra discovered that there were no Levites among the returning group, he told men to encourage them in the work. What lessons can we learn from Ezra regarding those who are not eager to do God's work?
2. Why was Ezra so meticulous in counting the temple treasures?

Do He Restored the faith of the Israelites

When Zerubbabel and the first group of captives returned to the homeland eighty years earlier, they began to rebuild the temple that was destroyed. The rebuilding of the temple was a physical project. What Ezra faced now was a more difficult task, that of reconstructing the hearts and faith of the people. When Ezra arrived in the holy city, he was greatly grieved to learn that the people of Israel had not kept themselves separate from the peoples of the land, but had intermarried with them. Ezra saw history repeating itself before his very eyes. How did Ezra deal with the sins of the people?

Deeply grieved, Ezra fasted and prayed (Ez 9:3-15). Note how Ezra reacted to the sins of the people; he tore his garments and mantle, pulled hair out of his head and beard, fasted and mourned for sins. In his prayer, Ezra uses the words: we, our, us. This was the prayer of someone who had not sinned, yet he identified himself amongst the offenders. Ezra did not pray as one who was free from sin and pointed a finger at those who did, like the Pharisee (Lk 18:9-14). He truly repented and prayed for the sins of the people. Touched by Ezra's tears of grief and love, a great assembly of men, women and children gathered, weeping bitterly and vowing to change.

Ezra was very sensitive to sin. While the leaders thought that their sins in marrying gentiles were inconsequential, Ezra viewed their sins as a serious violation against God. Sensitivity to sin does not come from our emotions or feelings. It comes from an understanding of God's word. Ezra was well versed in God's words and as a result he had an acute awareness of what was right and wrong. He knew that to remove sin from their midst, the people had to separate themselves from their gentile spouses and children. Although this measure seems extreme and callous, it was necessary to preserve Israel as a nation committed to God. Sometimes when dealing with sin we have to be brutal. Sin is like a cancerous tumor. We cannot care for it and tend to it lovingly. We have to cut it off immediately. Otherwise it will spread and cause death. Living in the end time, we need to have Ezra's sensitivity towards sin. We cannot compromise with sin, but remove the cause of sin courageously.

Reflection:

1. What makes Ezra a good spiritual leader?
2. Is there anything in our lives that causes us to sin?
3. Are there any character traits or weaknesses in us that separate us from God?

4. What steps do we need to take to actively remove the root of these problems?
5. How do you respond to problems in the church— do you tackle difficult issues head on or do you avoid confrontation and ignore the problem?

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



Due to the nature of this lesson, the Check For Understanding questions can be found after each Bible Study section under the heading "Reflection".

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



Making a Difference

Below is a short prose piece/work written by a monk. Share it with the class and then complete the activity.

*When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world.
I found it was difficult to change the world, so I tried to change my nation
When I found that I couldn't change the nation, I began to focus on my town
I couldn't change the town and as an older man, I tried to change my family.
Now, as an old man, I realize the only thing I can change is myself
And suddenly I realize that if long ago I had changed myself,
I could have made an impact on my family
My family and I could have made an impact on our town.
Their impact could have changed the nation and I could indeed have changed the world.*

Unknown Monk

Our lives are short. It is commonly believed that the most meaningful life is one in which after we have departed from the world, we can say we have helped to make the world a better place. Many of us may have dreams and ideals to change the things around us or achieve great things for God. But making a difference in our lives and in the lives of others does not happen immediately, or involve a gigantic leap. Rather, changes most often occur over a span of time consisting of many little steps. Today we learned that Ezra's resolutions greatly impacted the faith of the Israelite nation and prevented them from heading for another spiritual decline. But

Ezra was given a chance to make a difference starting with himself. He resolved to find out about God's will in his life. He resolved to study and learn God's word, to practice it and then to teach it to others.

In the following exercise, reflect on the various areas of your life and character that you need to improve on. Be honest with yourselves and get into the nooks and crannies. Often we tend to neglect the small things, but it is these very things that may hinder our progress in faith. For example, we may be a person who flares up easily. Think of the reasons why we get so hot-tempered. Have we done anything about it? What does the Bible say? How are we going to apply those teachings in our daily life so that we actively remove it? If we continue to examine ourselves in this way and apply the words of God in our daily lives, we will surely see a change in ourselves and the people around us.

Things I need to change	What does the Bible say about this?	How am I going to put it into practice?	How am I going to teach others?

REFLECTION & PRAYER



Ezra made it his duty to study and practice the word of God. He made it his duty to teach his own generation the laws and ordinances of God. He made it his duty to lead the Jewish exiles back to Jerusalem in peace and safety and to turn their hearts back to God. Let us purify ourselves from what is ignoble, so that we can be a vessel for noble use, consecrated and useful to the master of the house, ready for any good work (2 Tim 2:21).

Lesson 11

Lydia, the Seller of Purple

Listed Scriptures

Acts 16:1-40; Phil 1:10; 1 Pet 3:1-6

Lesson Aim

- 1) To learn the important role of women in the service of God
- 2) To learn the importance of apportioning time for God in our busy lives

Memory Verse

"Charm is deceitful, and beauty is passing, but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised." (Prov 31:30)

Bible Reading For This Week (for students and teachers)

Isaiah 51-55

BIBLE BACKGROUND



Philippi was the leading city of the region of Macedonia, which is northern Greece today. Philippi was an important center of business, government, communications and culture. It sat at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, and was a good center for church planting. During his second missionary, the Holy Spirit beckoned Paul to go to Macedonia and it was at this point that the church in Philippi was founded. The church later consisted mostly of gentile (non-Jewish) believers.

Thyatiras

Thyatiras was one of the Macedonian colonies and a city known for its commerce. From names discovered in monuments it is evident that the city was the melting pot of many nations and that the chief object of worship was Apollo, who was worshiped as the sun god under the name of Tyrinnus. Thyatira was conspicuous for its many guilds, which were united by common pursuits and religious rites. One of