

Timeline

Ezra

WHAT'S THE POINT OF

Ezra?

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Time in the Word and in prayer is time well spent.

586 B.C. +
JERUSALEM DESTROYED;
EXILES GO TO BABYLON

539 +
BABYLON OVERTHROWN
BY CYRUS

538 +
CYRUS'S DECREE;
EXILES RETURN TO JERUSALEM

537 +
TEMPLE CONSTRUCTION BEGINS

530 +
TEMPLE WORK HALTED

521 +
DARIUS BECOMES KING OF PERSIA

520 +
TEMPLE WORK RESUMED;
MESSAGES OF HAGGAI,
ZECHARIAH GIVEN

515 +
TEMPLE COMPLETED

458 +
EZRA COMES TO JERUSALEM

445 +
NEHEMIAH COMES
TO JERUSALEM

WHAT'S THIS BOOK ABOUT? Some of the Jews return to Jerusalem from exile and rebuild the Temple. Much later, Ezra arrives with another group of exiles and leads spiritual reforms.

WHO WROTE IT? Tradition says it was Ezra. Whoever compiled the information wrote during the time of Ezra.

WHEN DID IT HAPPEN? The events in this book happened between 538 and 450 B.C.

WHERE DOES THIS BOOK FIT? The events in Ezra take place during the period of the Jews' return from exile.

THE BREAKDOWN

- Chapters 1–2: Cyrus authorizes the first return
- Chapter 3: Temple worship is revived
- Chapters 4–6: The Temple is completed
- Chapters 7–8: Ezra travels to Jerusalem
- Chapters 9–10: Spiritual reforms

KEY CONCEPTS

- Worship
- Temple
- Dedication

SCORECARD

- **Ezra:** The priest who led a group of exiles back to Jerusalem from Persia
- **Cyrus, Darius, Artaxerxes:** Kings of Persia who authorized and supported the Jews' return

READING TIME :20
IN HOURS :30 | 1:00 | 1:30 | 2:00 | 2:30

WORTH MEMORIZING

- **8:22** "Our God's hand of protection is on all who worship him, but his fierce anger rages against those who abandon him."

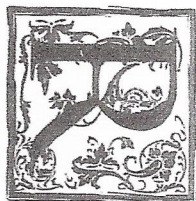
THE MASCULINE PERSPECTIVE

- **THE SECRET OF TRUE SUCCESS.** It's easy for men to believe that their savvy and skill bring success. Ezra's story shows that the real mover and shaker behind the scenes is God.

1:1 All of us need something that we can count on. The Jews in exile counted on Jeremiah's prophecy—that their captivity would last only 70 years. Today, God has promises for us, too. If we accept Jesus as our Savior, the Holy Spirit will comfort us and help us. We will become new people—leaving our old ways behind (see 2 Corinthians 5:17). And though our problems may seem overwhelming today, God has given us promises of deliverance.

1:3 We need to make the most of every opportunity God brings our way. The Jews had been living in Babylonian exile for many years. King Cyrus gave them an open invitation to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their nation—and their lives. Through the work of Jesus Christ, God has given us an open invitation to rebuild our lives as well.

1:4-6 It is important to have people to encourage us in our spiritual growth. Even though many Jews remained in Persia, they encouraged and supported those who chose to return to Judah. Had those making the return trip not been given assistance, they might not have had the motivation or strength to see the mission through. In the same way, we should seek to encourage others in their journey toward spiritual maturity.



Rebuilding is usually harder than original construction, whether it's a coach rebuilding a team, a family rebuilding a home, a couple rebuilding a marriage, or a prodigal rebuilding a life. But whatever we're rebuilding, we have a blueprint for it in the book of Ezra.

Years after the Jewish people had been defeated and dispersed by their enemies, a group of Jews, in three waves over a period of about a hundred years, returned to their ancestral homeland to rebuild their nation. It was a tough trip. Their once-glorious temple was in total ruin and the wall around the city was rubble. The book of Ezra tells us how these returnees rebuilt the temple; and the book of Nehemiah tells how they rebuilt the walls.

Ezra falls into two sections that cover the first and second returns of these exiles. Chapters 1 through 6 describe the first group of returnees and the rebuilding of the temple. Chapters 7 through 10 cover the second return and the ministry of the teacher Ezra, who taught the people God's Word and stressed the importance of remaining separate from the world.

The book of Ezra teaches us to seek the Lord in prayer, submit to His Word, and acknowledge His wisdom, power, presence, and love. The rubble may not be cleared away in a day or a year, but when we put first things first, the rest of life will come back into alignment. Begin with the altar—with worship—and restoration will follow.



KEY THOUGHT:

In showing how the returning exiles rebuilt their temple, city, and nation, Ezra teaches us to rebuild areas in our lives that have been damaged or defeated.



KEY VERSE:

"Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from Him the right way for us and our little ones and all our possessions."

Ezra 8:21



KEY ACTION:

In rebuilding anything, we must start with the altar—reestablishing the Cross of Jesus Christ as central to our lives and activities.



KEY PRAYER:

Lord, may I be faithful to study Your Word and live my life as a testimony to its precepts.

BASIC SURVEY

EZRA

AUTHOR: Not stated, but traditionally Ezra, a priest (7:11).

DATE: Approximately 539 BC to the mid-400s BC.

INTEN WORDS OR LESS

Spiritual renewal begins after the Jews return from exile.

DETAILS, PLEASE

About a half century after the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem and carried the Jews into captivity, Persia is the new world power. King Cyrus allows a group of exiles to return to Judah to rebuild the temple. Some 42,000 people return and resettle the land. Around seventy years later, Ezra is part of a smaller group that also returns. He teaches the Law to the people, who have fallen away from God to the point of intermarrying with nearby pagan nations, something that was strictly forbidden by Moses (7:1-3).

QUOTEABLE

➤ Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments (7:10 KJV).

UNIQUE AND UNUSUAL

Though God has said, "I hate divorce" (Malachi 2:16 NASB), Ezra urged Jewish men to separate from their foreign wives.

SO WHAT?

In Ezra, God shows His willingness to offer a second chance—allowing a nation that had been punished for disobedience to have a fresh start. Guess what? He's still in the second-chance business.

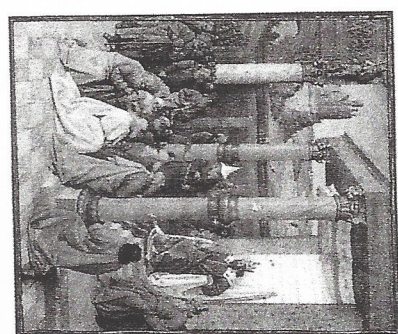
READ EZRA 1-2.

- One-Month Course: your next reading is on page 87. →
- Three-Month Course: your next reading is on page 87. →
- Six-Month Course: your next reading is on page 84. →

CLOSER LOOK

REBUILDING GOD'S TEMPLE

In 586 BC, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, tore down the temple Solomon had built, and exiled the Jews to Babylon. Then in 539 BC, the Persian king Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to Judah and rebuild their temple. In 536 BC, three years later, Zerubbabel led the priests and Levites in laying the foundation of the new temple.



Cyrus was the king of Persia and allowed the Jews to return to Judah. He is depicted in this painting by Jean Fouquet (c. 1420-1480) titled *Empereur Cyrus the Great of Persia*.

Now, Samaritans were living in the land, and their faith was a mixture of Jewish worship and pagan idolatry. They offered to help rebuild, but when the Jews declined, the Samaritans "set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building" (Ezra 4:4 NIV). They sent a letter to the new Persian king, Artaxerxes, complaining that this building threatened the peace of his kingdom. Artaxerxes believed them and commanded the Jews to stop. For the next ten years, 530-520 BC, construction on the temple was abandoned.

Cyrus had written an edict permitting the Jews to rebuild, and no law of the Persians could be changed, so they had a *right* to build. But since the present king had ruled against them, the Jews decided to postpone things. They knew that they should build, but reasoned, "The time has not yet come to rebuild the LORD's house" (Haggai 1:2 NIV).

Then God raised up two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, who encouraged the leaders to finish the work. The Jews began building once again, and in four years, from 520 to 516 BC, they finished all the work and dedicated the new temple (Ezra 6:13-15).

READ EZRA 3-4.

- Six-Month Course: your next reading is on page 85. →

CLOSER LOOK

EZRA THE SCRIBE

Despite Cyrus's edict allowing the Jews to return to Judea, many of them had continued living in Babylon, and it became a major center of Jewish learning. Ezra was the foremost Jewish scholar during the reign of King Artaxerxes. "Ezra was a scribe who was well versed in the Law of Moses," and he "had determined to study and obey the Law of the LORD and to teach these decrees and regulations to the people of Israel" (Ezra 7:6, 10 NLT).

Besides being a top scholar and teacher, Ezra was a man of great personal faith in God. The priests traveling with him were all carrying valuable treasures of silver and gold for the temple, but Ezra didn't ask the king for armed guards to protect them and the treasure from bandits. He trusted God to protect them on their long journey—and He did!

When Ezra traveled to Israel to teach God's Word, "the king gave him everything he asked for, because the gracious hand of the LORD his God was on him" (Ezra 7:6 NLT). Artaxerxes sent a letter to his treasurers in the western provinces commanding them to give Ezra whatever he needed. He also sent a letter giving Ezra great judicial and civil authority.

King Artaxerxes wanted to ensure that he had the favor of Israel's God. He needed it. Egypt, right next to Judah, had just revolted and driven out the Persians. The year of Ezra's trip, 458 BC, Artaxerxes was just starting to re-visit Egypt.



Ezra was a scribe who was dedicated to teaching others about God.

READ EZRA 7-8.

● Six-Month Course: your next reading is on page 87.



HIDDEN TREASURE

SEARCH FOR A DOCUMENT

The Persian king Artaxerxes told the Jews to stop rebuilding Jerusalem and their temple—but they had received permission from King Cyrus, so they continued working. When Tattenai, the governor, asked them, "Who authorized you to rebuild this temple and to finish it?" (Ezra 5:3 NIV), they replied that Cyrus had. Tattenai then wrote to the Persian king: "Let a search be made in the royal archives of Babylon to see if King Cyrus did in fact issue a decree to rebuild this house of God in Jerusalem" (Ezra 5:17 NIV). A search in the archives of Babylon turned up nothing. But the officials kept looking—and eventually the edict was found in the distant city of Ecbatana. The king then told the Jews to continue rebuilding.

READ EZRA 5-6.

HIDDEN TREASURE

SEPARATING FROM PAGAN WIVES

When Ezra arrived in Judah, he learned that many Jews there were seriously compromising. In disobedience to the Law of Moses, they had been marrying the pagans who lived there (Exodus 34:15-16). It wouldn't be long before they began worshipping their gods and falling into idolatry all over again. They had just survived judgment and exile in Babylon, and God had graciously allowed a remnant to survive and return to their land. But now *this!* Had the pagan women embraced faith in the true God—as Ruth and others had (Ruth 1:16; 2:12; Esther 8:17)—their marriages would have been blessed. But they weren't willing. Thus, painful as it was, Ezra commanded those who had married pagan women to separate from them. And they did.

READ EZRA 9-10.

A Scribe of Grace

Some things you should know

Ezra

WHEN A PRIEST AND SCHOLAR named Ezra became convinced sometime around 458 B.C. that he should return to the ruined homeland of his people, he probably had no idea how difficult the task ahead would be. He knew only that God had touched his heart for the

welfare of his homeland and that he had to do something about it.

Nearly every time that Ezra describes a triumph in his ministry or personal life, he mentions grace as the underlying reason.

While we might attribute Ezra's success to foresight, determination, good political connections, and grit, he consistently pointed to another source for his victories. We might not expect the source he names—especially since he lived in challenging Old Testament times, not exciting New Testament days. To what did Ezra attribute his ministry success? Grace!

Nearly every time Ezra describes a triumph in his ministry or personal life, he mentions grace as the underlying reason. Consider a few of the major milestones in his career:

- Before Ezra set out from Persia on his mission, the mighty King Artaxerxes "gave him everything he asked for." Why? Because "the gracious hand of the Lord his God was on him" (7:6).
- Beyond the gifts and supplies, the scribe received tremendous honor—not only in the presence of the king, but also before the king's council and all his leading nobles. Why? Because "the gracious hand of the Lord my God was on me" (7:28).
- Just before Ezra set out on his journey to Jerusalem, he felt disappointed that no Levites had joined his expedition. So he contacted some friends for their help, and soon a number of Levites showed up. Why? Because "the gracious hand of our God was on us" (8:18).
- Ezra prayed for safe travel and protection from thieves, then instituted several practical safety measures. The result? "The gracious hand of our God protected us and saved us from enemies and bandits along the way" (8:31).
- Even when Ezra discovered that many of his countrymen had married pagan wives and thus had broken God's law, he took refuge in grace. In a prayer of confession he said, "But now we have been given a brief moment of grace, for the Lord our God has allowed a few of us to survive as a remnant" (9:8).

You probably already know that grace is essential for salvation, but Ezra shows us that grace applies to other areas of our lives as well. And we need it more than we know.

THE POINT: Learn to depend on grace in every aspect of life.

Marriages of Convenience

Ezra 9-10

IT'S BEEN SAID that when a man marries a woman, he marries her family, too. In the case of ancient Israel, people married not only families but those families' gods.

After a terrible period of captivity in Babylon, the Jewish people returned to Palestine. One day a religious scholar named Ezra arrived. Ezra committed himself to obeying the will of God and teaching others.

That brought up the thorny topic of intermarriage. When the Jews returned to Palestine, God had commanded them to remain separate from the other people in order to maintain the purity of their devotion to God. God's desire for his people not to intermarry was not a racial or ethnic matter but a spiritual one.

But the people didn't obey. They married Egyptians, Canaanites, Hittites, Moabites, and people from other surrounding nations—and they assimilated their pagan gods. The worst offenders were Jewish rulers and priests.

As a result, Israel once again fell on hard times. Ezra was forced to his knees, where he prayed to God: "Once again we have abandoned your commands! Your servants the prophets warned us when they said, 'The land you are entering to possess is totally defiled by the detestable practices of the people living there. . . . Now we are being punished because of our wickedness and our great guilt'" (Ezra 9:10-11, 13).

Ezra's prayer was heartfelt. He wept. He threw himself to the ground in front of the temple. And in time, his honesty with God inspired others. The people gathered and confessed their sins. The leaders devised a plan to atone for the sins of marrying the pagan neighbors and adopting their gods.

God's people promised that in the future they would take more care, knowing that when they married they were marrying into a religious culture as well as a family.

ROLE MODELS:
 JOSHUA • HAGGAI • ZECHARIAH • ZERUBBABEL • EZRA

DID YOU KNOW?

- ▶ The rebuilding of the temple was delayed for several years by political opposition, but it was finally completed when the original order by King Cyrus was located.
- ▶ The Israelites' return to their homeland from captivity is often called the "second exodus."

EZRA

IN A NUTSHELL

- ▶ About 70 years after the Babylonians captured Jerusalem and took the Israelites away into captivity, the kingdom of Persia defeated Babylon and allowed any Israelites to return to Jerusalem who chose to do so. They also returned 5,400 articles of gold and silver that the Babylonians had originally carried away from the temple in Jerusalem (1.11).

THE MAN EZRA

- Was a direct descendant of Aaron (7:1-5)
- Received the hand of the Lord on him (7:6)
- Studied and obeyed God's Word (7:10)
- Had the wisdom of God (7:25)
- Prayed and wept bitterly (10:1)
- Fasted and mourned for Israel (10:6)
- Appointed men to positions of leadership (10:16)

KEY EVENTS

Around 42,000 Israelites returned to their homes from captivity in Persia and gathered together in Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. Joshua and Zerubbabel led the first group; Ezra led the second group.

BY THE NUMBERS

10 CHAPTERS
 280 VERSES
 6,267 WORDS

LIFE LESSONS: Confession and repentance of sin is done somberly and thoughtfully (10:1).

HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW EZRA?

EZRA IN REVIEW

- ✘ **WHO DUNNIT?**
 1. Who carried 5,400 silver and gold artifacts back to Jerusalem from Babylon?
- 🔥 **HOT SEAT**
 2. As King Cyrus's treasurer, I counted out all the gold and silver articles taken from Jerusalem. What is my name?
- ★ **MINUTIAE & MISCELLANY**
 3. Approximately how many men and women, including slaves, returned from Babylon?
 A. 3,000
 B. 70,000
 C. 5,000
 D. 50,000
- 🕒 **TIME TRAVELER**
 4. You are the only priest named who rebuilt the altar of the God of Israel. Who are you?
- ✘ **WHO DUNNIT?**
 5. Which of the following kings of Persia was against the rebuilding of Jerusalem?
 A. Cyrus
 B. Darius
 C. Artaxerxes
 D. Xerxes
- ❓ **"?" CRYPTIC PHRASES**
 6. Who is Shealtiel?
- ★ **MINUTIAE & MISCELLANY**
 7. Who was king of Persia when the rebuilding of the temple was completed?
- ➡ **THEN VS. NOW**
 8. The first thing the Israelites did after the temple was built was celebrate the Passover. At the time, it lasted seven days. Is it the same now?
- 🔥 **HOT SEAT**
 9. I am the father of Ezra, descended from Eleazar son of Aaron. What is my name?
- ★ **MINUTIAE & MISCELLANY**
 10. After Ezra returned to Jerusalem, the returned exiles made several burnt offerings to God. How many animals in all were sacrificed?
- 🗣️ **WHO SAID IT?**
 11. "Our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens."
 A. Ezra
 B. Cyrus
 C. Darius
 D. Joshua
- ❓ **"?" CRYPTIC PHRASES**
 12. What are Shekariah, Shelomith, Bigvai and Hakkatan?
 A. Native bond servants to King Artaxerxes
 B. Names of some of the people who returned with Ezra to Jerusalem
 C. Specially designated areas within Jerusalem for returning exiles
 D. Four rivers located primarily in Persia and Babylon

ANSWERS

1. Shestazzar 2. Mithredath 3. Darius 4. Joshua 5. C 6. Darius 7. Darius 8. Yes, the Passover celebration still lasts seven days. 9. Zerubbabel 10. 100,000 11. A 12. 12,121 13. 12,121 14. 12,121 15. 12,121 16. 12,121 17. 12,121 18. 12,121 19. 12,121 20. 12,121 21. 12,121 22. 12,121 23. 12,121 24. 12,121 25. 12,121 26. 12,121 27. 12,121 28. 12,121 29. 12,121 30. 12,121 31. 12,121 32. 12,121 33. 12,121 34. 12,121 35. 12,121 36. 12,121 37. 12,121 38. 12,121 39. 12,121 40. 12,121 41. 12,121 42. 12,121 43. 12,121 44. 12,121 45. 12,121 46. 12,121 47. 12,121 48. 12,121 49. 12,121 50. 12,121 51. 12,121 52. 12,121 53. 12,121 54. 12,121 55. 12,121 56. 12,121 57. 12,121 58. 12,121 59. 12,121 60. 12,121 61. 12,121 62. 12,121 63. 12,121 64. 12,121 65. 12,121 66. 12,121 67. 12,121 68. 12,121 69. 12,121 70. 12,121 71. 12,121 72. 12,121 73. 12,121 74. 12,121 75. 12,121 76. 12,121 77. 12,121 78. 12,121 79. 12,121 80. 12,121 81. 12,121 82. 12,121 83. 12,121 84. 12,121 85. 12,121 86. 12,121 87. 12,121 88. 12,121 89. 12,121 90. 12,121 91. 12,121 92. 12,121 93. 12,121 94. 12,121 95. 12,121 96. 12,121 97. 12,121 98. 12,121 99. 12,121 100. 12,121