

The background of the cover is a complex, light gray architectural drawing or blueprint. It features various geometric shapes, lines, and circular patterns, resembling a floor plan or a technical drawing of a building. The drawing is dense and detailed, with many small circles and lines indicating specific points and structures.

EZRA

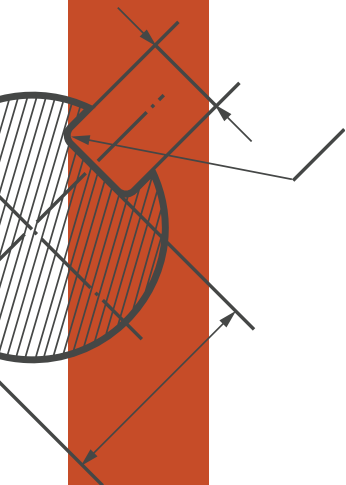
RETURNING.REBUILDING.RESTORING

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PREFACE

The book of Ezra tells a powerful story of returning, rebuilding, and restoring—themes that deeply resonate with our calling as followers of Jesus today. While the ancient Israelites worked to rebuild a physical temple in Jerusalem, we too are invited into God’s work. Along with the Holy Spirit we get to participate with Jesus in building up the body of Christ, His Church, and bringing His peace and restoration to our communities today.

Just as God used Ezra to lead a spiritual reformation among the returned exiles, Jesus empowers us to be agents of transformation in our own city.¹

While Ezra’s story ends with incomplete restoration because of human limitations, our stories continue through the perfect work of Jesus. Because of Him, we have access to true peace with God and the power to extend that peace to others in ways the returning exiles could only imagine.

Our prayer is that through this study, you’ll be inspired and equipped to join Jesus in His ongoing work of bringing peace and restoration to our community—of participating in making Salem a city at peace with God—not through human effort alone, but also through His transformative power working in and through us.

¹ This transformation can include many aspects, including physical, emotional, financial, spiritual, relational, etc.

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

Read the Passage Carefully

The passage for each week will be included in the lesson. As you read it, take your time to understand the context and meaning. It's helpful to read it more than once, paying attention to any words or phrases that stand out. Not every chapter in Ezra will be studied in depth, but you may find it helpful to familiarize yourself with the sections that do not have corresponding questions.

Answer the Questions

After you've read the passage, you'll find questions designed to help you interact with the passage and prompt deeper thinking, reflection, and personal application.

Reflect on the Reflection Prompts

Sprinkled throughout each lesson will be reflection prompts. We encourage you to take time to fully engage with them. Reflecting deeply helps you connect the Scripture to your own life and faith journey and expand your head knowledge to include heart knowledge. Jot down your reflections, insights, or any questions that arise.

Discipleship Pathway

Discipleship is the journey of following and becoming more like Jesus—becoming a person of Christ-like love in communion with God. While there is no cookie-cutter formula for this journey, there are some common experiences that we will encounter along the way—these are what we call the Discipleship Pathway. Knowing the pathway can help us navigate each stage and inform us of our next step. At the end of each lesson we have pointed out where the people of Israel were on the Pathway and how that can help us process our own discipleship journey.

You can reference the Discipleship Pathway graphic on page 80 or utilize the QR code below to access all of the Discipleship Pathway resources.



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In order to understand the context of the book of Ezra, it is helpful to look at the history of the Israelite people. The nation of Israel started with Abraham and Sarah in Genesis. God called Abraham to be the father of His chosen people. He made a covenant with Abraham that he and his children would multiply and be blessed (**Genesis 12:1-3**).¹ A few generations later, Abraham's family went to Egypt during a famine that eventually led to their captivity there. However, the nation of Israel grew innumerable during their time as slaves in Egypt (**Genesis 21** through **Exodus 1**). God eventually raised Moses up to be the Israelites' deliverer and re-establish them in the Promised Land after 40 years of wandering in the desert. After many long and hard cyclical seasons of disobedience, repentance, and recovery in the time of the Judges, the people cried out to God for a human king (**Exodus** through **Judges**).

In 1050 BC, Saul became Israel's first king. He was succeeded by King David (1010 BC) and then by King Solomon (970 BC). After Solomon's death (around 930 BC), two men vied to be king, and the nation declined into civil war. The civil war led to a divided nation: the Northern Kingdom (primarily called Israel in the Old Testament) and the Southern Kingdom (primarily called Judah). During the next 200 years, the Northern Kingdom had 19 different kings, most of whom "did evil in the sight of the Lord" and deliberately promoted idolatry.² In 722 BC, Israel was invaded by Assyria—the new and cruel superpower of that era. Most of its population was deported to Assyria, and the Promise Land was inhabited by people of other nations.³

Judah (the Southern Kingdom) was conquered by Babylon in 586 BC. The Babylonians destroyed the capital city of Jerusalem and "burned down the Temple of the Lord, the royal palace, and all the houses of Jerusalem" (**2 Kings 25:9**). Women were raped (**Lamentations 5**), the people were

¹ God's intention to bless Abraham was ultimately to bless all nations through the coming of Jesus Christ. This is emphasized in **Galatians 3:8** when it says, "What's more, the Scriptures looked forward to this time when God would make the Gentiles right in his sight because of their faith. God proclaimed this good news to Abraham long ago when he said, "All nations will be blessed through you."

² See 1 and 2 Kings, specifically **1 Kings 15:26**.

³ However, some Jews did remain in the land and they taught people about the God of Israel. Thus, by the time of the New Testament, Samaria (this area of the Promise Land) is known as a syncretistic nation, having a mixture of different religions (see **2 Kings 17:24-28**). This also explains the statement in **Ezra 4:2**

3 when the people of the land claimed to worship God.

starved, the king's sons were killed while he watched, and then the king's eyes were gouged out (**Jeremiah 52**). Most of the survivors of this assault were taken as exiles to Babylon.

Just 47 years later, in 539 BC, the Persians, led by King Cyrus, rose to world dominance and overthrew Babylon. King Cyrus' political philosophy was very different from the domineering Babylonians and Assyrians. While both Babylon and Assyria sought to destroy the countries and religions they conquered, King Cyrus wanted to rule while still respecting the various customs and beliefs of conquered people. Cyrus' policy was so successful that his successors, Xerxes and Artaxerxes, continued it. A year after gaining power over Babylon, King Cyrus decreed that the Israelites could return to Jerusalem and even rebuild their Temple—the Temple that had been utterly destroyed by the Babylonians (**Ezra 1**). This decree was a key part of fulfilling the prophecy of **Jeremiah 29:10**.⁴ As a prophet, Jeremiah had warned the people that if they didn't repent from their sins and turn back to God they would lose their land and be taken into exile (**Jeremiah 2**). This prophecy was fulfilled when they were conquered by the Assyrians and Babylonians. However, Jeremiah later prophesied to those in exile that eventually God would bring them home (**Jeremiah 29**).⁵

A man named Zerubbabel led the first group of Israelites back to the Promised Land in 537 BC, and two years later they began to rebuild the Temple (**Ezra 3:8**). The Israelites who returned to rebuild started out with the right goals and attitudes, but they quickly slipped back into wrong behavior and, after six years, stopped working to rebuild the Temple. In fact, there was absolutely no building done for many years. So, God raised up the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to minister to, and challenge, the returned exiles (**Ezra 5:1-2**). They encouraged the Israelites to rethink their priorities and get back to work on the Temple—their much-needed center of worship. Work on the Temple resumed in 520 BC in the second year of the reign of the Persian king, Darius (**Ezra 4:24**). With King Darius' support,

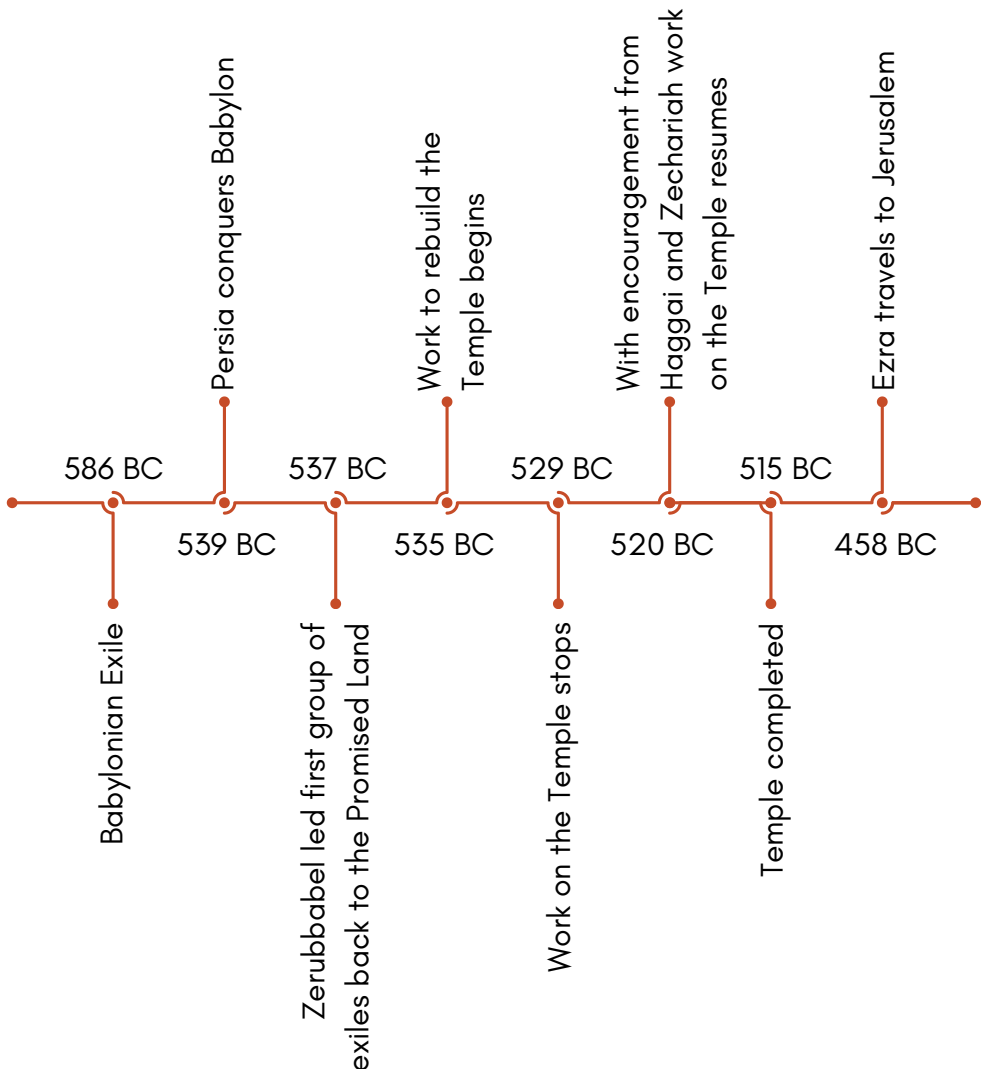
⁴Babylon had first attacked Israel's Southern Kingdom (Judah) in 605 BC and taken many prominent hostages to Babylon, including the prophet Daniel. Thus, when the first Jews were repatriated to their homeland in 539 BC, Jeremiah's prophecy of a 70-year exile was fulfilled (**Jeremiah 29:10**).

⁵"The 'office' of prophet was instituted during the days of Samuel, the last of the judges. Prophets stood with the priests as God's special representatives. The prophet's role was to speak for God, confronting the people and their leaders with God's command and promises. Because of this confrontational stance and the continuing tendency of people to disobey God, true prophets usually were not very popular. But though their message often went unheeded, they faithfully and forcefully proclaimed the truth." *Life Application Study Bible: New Living Translation*, Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2014. 1088

the Temple was completed in 515 BC.

Many years later, during the reign of King Artaxerxes of Persia (465–424 BC), we are introduced to a man named Ezra, a scribe well-versed in the Law of Moses who traveled to Jerusalem in 458 BC to teach the people the Law and bring religious reforms (**Ezra 7-9**).

A unique feature of this book is that the titular character, Ezra, doesn't appear in the story until over halfway through. Originally the book of Ezra was combined with the book of Nehemiah, making it one book "Ezra-Nehemiah," written by a single unknown author.⁶



⁶ Mackie, Timothy P. *Read Scripture: Illustrated Summaries of Biblical Books*. The Bible Project, 2017. 30

GOD'S SOVEREIGN FAITHFULNESS

Lesson 1

Ezra 1:1-11

Ezra 1 serves as a powerful reminder of God's faithfulness and sovereignty throughout history. It invites us to recognize how God is actively involved in our lives and communities, urging us to participate in His restorative work. Just as the Jewish exiles responded to God's call to return and rebuild, we too are called to respond with faith, generosity, and a commitment to our community.



Read Ezra 1:1-11

1 In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, the Lord fulfilled the prophecy he had given through Jeremiah. He stirred the heart of Cyrus to put this proclamation in writing and to send it throughout his kingdom: 2 "This is what King Cyrus of Persia says:

"The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth. He has appointed me to build him a Temple at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. 3 Any of you who are his people may go to Jerusalem in Judah to rebuild this Temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, who lives in Jerusalem. And may your God be with you! 4 Wherever this Jewish remnant is found, let their neighbors contribute toward their expenses by giving them silver and gold, supplies for the journey, and livestock, as well as a voluntary offering for the Temple of God in Jerusalem."

5 Then God stirred the hearts of the priests and Levites and the leaders of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple of the Lord. 6 And all their neighbors assisted by giving them articles of silver and gold, supplies for the journey, and livestock. They gave them many valuable gifts in addition to all the voluntary offerings.

7 King Cyrus himself brought out the articles that King Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the Lord's Temple in Jerusalem and had placed in the temple of his own gods. 8 Cyrus directed Mithredath, the treasurer of Persia, to count these items and present them to Sheshbazzar, the leader of the exiles returning to Judah. 9 This is a list of the items that were returned:

gold basins 30

silver basins 1,000

silver incense burners 29

10 gold bowls 30

silver bowls 410

other items 1,000

11 In all, there were 5,400 articles of gold and silver. Sheshbazzar brought all of these along when the exiles went from Babylon to Jerusalem.



In **Ezra 1:1** and **1:5**, God stirred the hearts of Cyrus, the priests, and the leaders of Israel. In your own words, describe what you think it means that God stirred someone's heart.



Have you ever experienced something like this in your life? If so, consider sharing that experience.



Though King Cyrus was not an Israelite—one of God's chosen people—how do you see God's hand at work in his proclamation? (**Ezra 1:2-4**)



Where have you seen God use a variety of people to further His Kingdom today?



What did Cyrus' proclamation mean for the people of Israel?

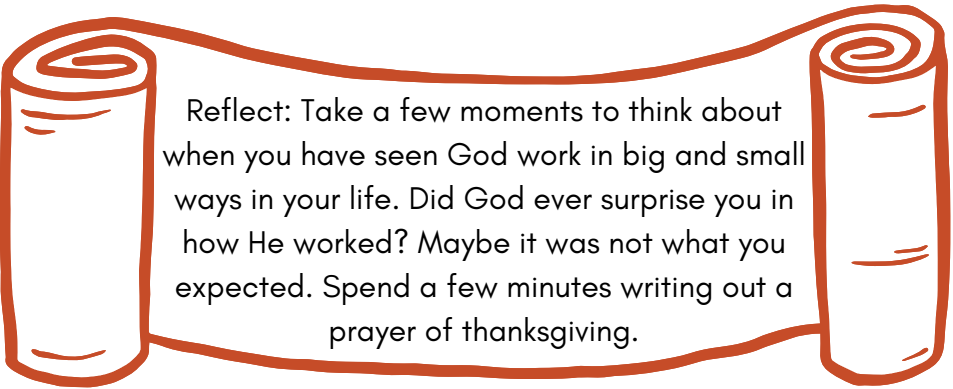


How does this chapter fulfill the prophecy given by Jeremiah in Jeremiah **29:10-14**?¹

10 This is what the Lord says: "You will be in Babylon for seventy years. But then I will come and do for you all the good things I have promised, and I will bring you home again. 11 For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. 12 In those days when you pray, I will listen. 13 If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me. 14 I will be found by you," says the Lord. "I will end your captivity and restore your fortunes. I will gather you out of the nations where I sent you and will bring you home again to your own land."


¹As a prophet, Jeremiah had warned the people that if they didn't repent from their sins and turn back to God they would lose their land and be taken into exile (**Jeremiah 2**), but later he also prophesied to those in exile that eventually God would bring them home (**Jeremiah 29**).


? How can the fulfillment of God's promises in the past encourage your faith in the present?





Reflect: Take a few moments to think about when you have seen God work in big and small ways in your life. Did God ever surprise you in how He worked? Maybe it was not what you expected. Spend a few minutes writing out a prayer of thanksgiving.


? **Ezra 1:5-6** shows the collective response of the people to Cyrus' proclamation. What do you see them doing?

 What does their response say about the importance of the community of faith in action?

 Consider ways you can contribute to the work of restoration in your community and spheres of influence. How can you practice generosity, reflecting God's provision for us?

 Our calling may not be to rebuild the Temple, but how can we, as believers in community, support one another in pursuing God's calling to further His Kingdom here on earth?

 What does or could it look like to tangibly partner with God and other believers to bring His peace and restoration to your community? Write out some ideas here:

 What practical steps can we take to encourage each other in this process?

For the Israelites, exile meant losing everything they had known—family ties, communal worship, and the land that was promised to them. It would have been a disorienting experience that left them grappling with their identity as God’s people. Therefore, the return to Jerusalem was not just about rebuilding a temple; it was also about God restoring the people’s true identity as His chosen people. Through Jesus we are also a chosen people—God’s children.



How can understanding our identity in Christ help us navigate our lives when we find ourselves in seasons of doubt, questioning, hardship, or loss, etc.?



Underline or circle who God says we are in the following verses:

Romans 8:15-17

15 So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God’s Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, “Abba, Father.” 16 For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God’s children. 17 And since we are his children, we are his heirs. In fact, together with Christ we are heirs of God’s glory. But if we are to share his glory, we must also share his suffering.

Galatians 3:26-29

26 For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. 27 And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes. 28 There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And now that you belong to Christ, you are the true children of Abraham. You are his heirs, and God’s promise to Abraham belongs to you.

Ephesians 2:19-22

19 So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family. 20 Together, we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself. 21 We are carefully joined together in him, becoming a holy temple for the Lord. 22 Through him you Gentiles are also being made part of this dwelling where God lives by his Spirit.

Colossians 1:11-14

11 We also pray that you will be strengthened with all his glorious power so you will have all the endurance and patience you need. May you be filled with joy, 12 always thanking the Father. He has enabled you to share in the inheritance that belongs to his people, who live in the light. 13 For he has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of his dear Son, 14 who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins.

1 Peter 2:9

9 But you are not like that, for you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light.



How can these truths about our identity shape the way we engage with each other and our community as we point them to Christ?



Ezra 1:7-11 describes the articles that had been taken from the Temple that King Cyrus was allowing them to take back to Jerusalem.

“There is a significant amount of drama in the process of counting out each piece of treasure and sending it on its way to Jerusalem. These treasures represented the sacred temple and the God who resided within it. The return of these vessels, too long under the control of foreign powers, symbolized the restoration of divine favor, the continuity of the community’s religious heritage, and the renewal of its worship.”²

How does the return of these sacred Temple articles speak to God’s character, faithfulness, and plan?³



Many of our challenges aren’t on the scale of the Israelites’ exile; however, they can still be an opportunity for God to do His work and show His character, just as the exile and return was for the people of Israel. The size of our challenges doesn’t dictate the size or reality of God’s character and faithfulness. Use the following chart to process some of the challenges the people around you, or in our city, are facing.

Physical:	Relational:	Emotional:	Spiritual:

² Harrington, Hannah K. *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2022. 112

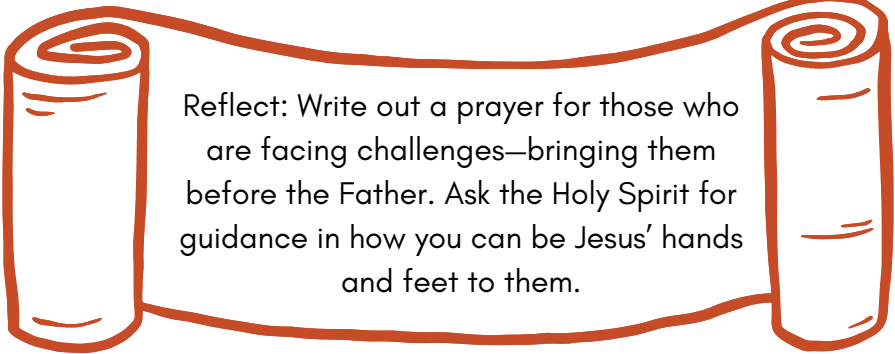
³ “Every article of gold and silver was a witness to God’s protection and care. Although many years had passed, God delivered these temple articles back to his people.” *Life Application Study Bible: New Living Translation*, Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2014. 722



How would you like to see God meet those needs?



How might God be calling you to participate with Him in meeting those needs?





Discipleship Pathway

It's not a stretch to say that the Israelites were experiencing what we might call "Unsettled and Questioning" in their journey of following God.

This part of the journey can be characterized by experiences of pain and hardship, abrupt change, or life transition that can result in a sense of uncertainty about aspects of faith. Our concept of God no longer fits in a box, and we may find ourselves reevaluating previously held beliefs.

If this description fits where you are on the pathway of following Jesus, it can be comforting to know that you are not the first or only person to experience such things as you follow God. Rather than avoiding these harder seasons of life in the community of faith, we can engage with God and each other as we honestly express what's going on.

Here are some questions that could be helpful to process:

- How is your perception and experience of God being challenged and/or changing?
- What questions or doubts are you currently wrestling with?
- Where do you find yourself always asking questions but not looking for answers?
- What fears are keeping you from journeying inward to the places of pain or wounding with Jesus?

As you honestly respond to these questions, utilize the simple three steps of the Welcoming Prayer.

What Is Welcoming Prayer?

Often when we have a negative or scary emotion, we tend to push it away. This type of prayer provides an opportunity to welcome that emotion or experience and to do so with the Holy Spirit. Welcoming prayer is a way to detach from the need to be secure, liked, and in control, and attach to the presence of Jesus instead. Welcoming Prayer anchors us to Jesus in the middle of our mess. This simple prayer teaches us to both accept and release. There are three steps to Welcoming Prayer.



SERMON NOTES



PRAYER REQUESTS

THE CALL TO REBUILD

Lesson 2

Ezra 3:1-13

Before we dive into **Ezra 3**, let's take a brief look at what happened in **Ezra 2**. **Ezra 2** lists the families and individuals who returned to Jerusalem from Babylonian exile after the decree of King Cyrus. The chapter provides a detailed census of the returning exiles, including priests, Levites, Temple servants, singers, gatekeepers, and various other groups. It also reveals the offerings they brought for the Temple. The chapter ends with the people settling back into the land. The priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers, the Temple servants, and some of the common people settled in villages near Jerusalem. The rest of the people returned to their own towns throughout Israel. (**Ezra 2:70**)



Read Ezra 3:1-13

1 In early autumn, when the Israelites had settled in their towns, all the people assembled in Jerusalem with a unified purpose. 2 Then Jeshua son of Jehozadak joined his fellow priests and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel with his family in rebuilding the altar of the God of Israel. They wanted to sacrifice burnt offerings on it, as instructed in the Law of Moses, the man of God. 3 Even though the people were afraid of the local residents, they rebuilt the altar at its old site. Then they began to sacrifice burnt offerings on the altar to the Lord each morning and evening.

4 They celebrated the Festival of Shelters as prescribed in the Law, sacrificing the number of burnt offerings specified for each day of the festival. 5 They also offered the regular burnt offerings and the offerings required for the new moon celebrations and the annual festivals as prescribed by the Lord. The people also gave voluntary offerings to the Lord. 6 Fifteen days before the Festival of Shelters began, the priests had begun to sacrifice burnt offerings to the Lord. This was even before they had started to lay the foundation of the Lord's Temple.

7 Then the people hired masons and carpenters and bought cedar logs from the people of Tyre and Sidon, paying them with food, wine, and olive

oil. The logs were brought down from the Lebanon mountains and floated along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea to Joppa, for King Cyrus had given permission for this.

8 The construction of the Temple of God began in midspring, during the second year after they arrived in Jerusalem. The work force was made up of everyone who had returned from exile, including Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Jeshua son of Jehozadak and his fellow priests, and all the Levites. The Levites who were twenty years old or older were put in charge of rebuilding the Lord's Temple. 9 The workers at the Temple of God were supervised by Jeshua with his sons and relatives, and Kadmiel and his sons, all descendants of Hodaviah. They were helped in this task by the Levites of the family of Henadad.

10 When the builders completed the foundation of the Lord's Temple, the priests put on their robes and took their places to blow their trumpets. And the Levites, descendants of Asaph, clashed their cymbals to praise the Lord, just as King David had prescribed. 11 With praise and thanks, they sang this song to the Lord:

"He is so good!

His faithful love for Israel endures forever!"

Then all the people gave a great shout, praising the Lord because the foundation of the Lord's Temple had been laid.

12 But many of the older priests, Levites, and other leaders who had seen the first Temple wept aloud when they saw the new Temple's foundation. The others, however, were shouting for joy. 13 The joyful shouting and weeping mingled together in a loud noise that could be heard far in the distance.



What did the Israelites do when they gathered in Jerusalem, and why did they take those specific actions? (3:1-2)



"The altar is the place where heaven and earth meet, where God and Israel are in communion ... The rebuilding of the altar is an act of enormous theological significance, for it means that the peculiar relationship between Yahweh and Israel can be reestablished and continued."¹

What does the act of rebuilding the altar symbolize for the returning exiles in terms of their relationship with God?



Why do you think the people were afraid of the local population?²
What did they accomplish despite their fear? **(3:3)**



What do you learn from these Israelites about taking action in the face of fear?

¹Bruggemann, Walter, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination*, 2003

²"Even though their families had been living [in the land] from First Temple times, the people of the land were considered outsiders by the Jewish community of returned exiles. The local inhabitants had never gone into exile and did not share the specific lifestyle and experience of the settlers." Harrington, Hannah K. *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2022. 151



After they built the altar, but before they built the foundation of the new Temple, what types of offerings and sacrifices did the people make and which festivals did they celebrate?³ (3:4-6)



“To participate in [the shelter of feasts], Jews constructed temporary dwellings—shacks or tents—in which they lived, both eating and sleeping, for one week. In this way, their history was reenacted, internalized, and remembered generationally.”⁴

How have you incorporated celebrations of significant spiritual moments into your own journey? What could it look like to expand on those or add some if you haven’t incorporated them?



What could that look like as a faith community?



From **verses 7-9**, what do you learn about the building of the new Temple’s foundation?



Often, we can skim over details like this. Why do you think these details were included?

³ See **Leviticus 23:33-43**

⁴ Harrington, Hannah K. *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2022. 145



This chapter is full of signposts pointing back to Israel’s past, reminding the people of God about their rich history.

- The rebuilding of the altar was on the same foundations as the original altar that David built. **(3:3)**
- The building of the new Temple began in the same month as the beginning of the building of the first Temple. **(3:8)**
- The age of service of the Levites was the same as prescribed by David **(3:8; 1 Chronicles 23:24)**
- The same hymn/poem accompanied the ceremonies of the first and second Temples. **(3:11; 1 Chronicles 16:34, 41)**

These rebuilding efforts, following in the footsteps of the original Temple, connected this community to their past and reminded them of God’s continued faithfulness.⁵

In what ways have or could we acknowledge and honor our own spiritual heritage while moving forward in our faith?



What were the people’s responses to finishing the foundation of the Temple? Why do you think they responded in these ways? **(Ezra 3:10-13)**

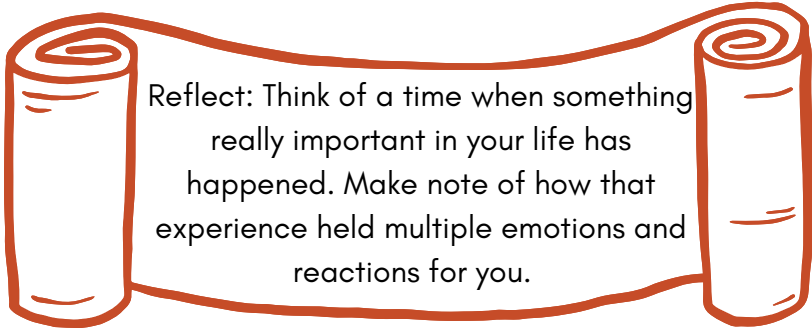


What might these reactions tell us about their experiences and expectations?

⁵Harrington, Hannah K. *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2022. 143-147

? “The mingled sounds of weeping and rejoicing remind us that God’s work of restoration often involves both letting go of the past and embracing the future. It challenges us to hold both grief and hope as we participate in His ongoing work of redemption.”⁶

How can we make space for joy and sorrow to coexist in our lives, particularly in our church family?



Reflect: Think of a time when something really important in your life has happened. Make note of how that experience held multiple emotions and reactions for you.

? As you look back over **Ezra 3**, how is worship described in this chapter? What does or could that kind of worship look like today?

⁶Wilkin, Jen. *God of Covenant: A Study of Genesis 12-50*. LifeWay Press, 2019.



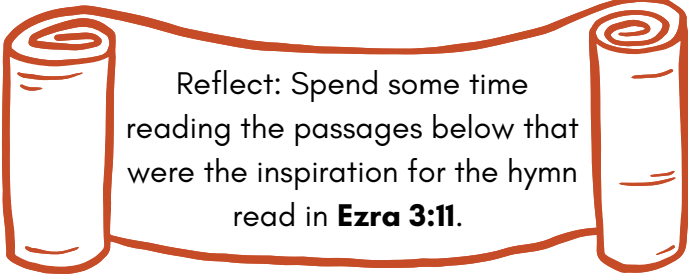
How can worship—bringing our praise and adoration to God—help in the process of restoration:

In your life:

In your family:

In community:

Other places:



Reflect: Spend some time reading the passages below that were the inspiration for the hymn read in **Ezra 3:11**.

Psalm 100:5

*For the Lord is good.
His unfailing love continues forever,
and his faithfulness continues to each generation.*

Psalm 106:1

*Praise the Lord! Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good!
His faithful love endures forever.*

Psalm 136

*1 Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good!
His faithful love endures forever.
2 Give thanks to the God of gods.
His faithful love endures forever.
3 Give thanks to the Lord of lords.
His faithful love endures forever.*

- 4 Give thanks to him who alone does mighty miracles.
His faithful love endures forever.
- 5 Give thanks to him who made the heavens so skillfully.
His faithful love endures forever.
- 6 Give thanks to him who placed the earth among the waters.
His faithful love endures forever.
- 7 Give thanks to him who made the heavenly lights—
His faithful love endures forever.
- 8 the sun to rule the day,
His faithful love endures forever.
- 9 and the moon and stars to rule the night.
His faithful love endures forever.
- 10 Give thanks to him who killed the firstborn of Egypt.
His faithful love endures forever.
- 11 He brought Israel out of Egypt.
His faithful love endures forever.
- 12 He acted with a strong hand and powerful arm.
His faithful love endures forever.
- 13 Give thanks to him who parted the Red Sea.
His faithful love endures forever.
- 14 He led Israel safely through,
His faithful love endures forever.
- 15 but he hurled Pharaoh and his army into the Red Sea.
His faithful love endures forever.
- 16 Give thanks to him who led his people through the wilderness.
His faithful love endures forever.
- 17 Give thanks to him who struck down mighty kings.
His faithful love endures forever.
- 18 He killed powerful kings—
His faithful love endures forever.
- 19 Sihon king of the Amorites,
His faithful love endures forever.
- 20 and Og king of Bashan.
His faithful love endures forever.
- 21 God gave the land of these kings as an inheritance—
His faithful love endures forever.

22 a special possession to his servant Israel.

His faithful love endures forever.

23 He remembered us in our weakness.

His faithful love endures forever.

24 He saved us from our enemies.

His faithful love endures forever.

25 He gives food to every living thing.

His faithful love endures forever.

26 Give thanks to the God of heaven.

His faithful love endures forever.



Discipleship Pathway

The Israelites were unified, purposeful, and experiencing the faithfulness of God. On the Discipleship Pathway, we might call this part of their journey a season of “Freedom and Purpose.” We just read some of the songs of praise that flowed as a result. You may or may not be able to relate fully to this particular season, but you have most likely gotten a sense of God’s faithful love somewhere along your pathway.

Take some time to continue the words of the Psalmist, using your own examples and your own life story.

Write some lines of praise and then follow them with the Psalmist’s refrain: His faithful love endures forever.



SERMON NOTES



PRAYER REQUESTS

OPPOSITION AND PERSEVERANCE

Lesson 3

Ezra 4:1-24

"From this point [**Ezra 4**] onwards right to the end of Nehemiah¹ there is conflict. Nothing that is attempted for God will now go unchallenged and scarcely a tactic be unexplored by the opposition. This chapter [**4**] describes the opening of hostilities and the first long set-back to the work..."²



Read Ezra 4:1-24

1 The enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the exiles were rebuilding a Temple to the Lord, the God of Israel. 2 So they approached Zerubbabel and the other leaders and said, "Let us build with you, for we worship your God just as you do. We have sacrificed to him ever since King Esarhaddon of Assyria brought us here."

3 But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the other leaders of Israel replied, "You may have no part in this work. We alone will build the Temple for the Lord, the God of Israel, just as King Cyrus of Persia commanded us."

4 Then the local residents tried to discourage and frighten the people of Judah to keep them from their work. 5 They bribed agents to work against them and to frustrate their plans. This went on during the entire reign of King Cyrus of Persia and lasted until King Darius of Persia took the throne.

6 Years later when Xerxes began his reign, the enemies of Judah wrote a letter of accusation against the people of Judah and Jerusalem.

7 Even later, during the reign of King Artaxerxes of Persia, the enemies of Judah, led by Bishlam, Mithredath, and Tabeel, sent a letter to Artaxerxes in the Aramaic language, and it was translated for the king.

8 Rehum the governor and Shimshai the court secretary wrote the letter, telling King Artaxerxes about the situation in Jerusalem. 9 They

¹ "In most modern Bibles these two books are separate, but that division happened long after it was written. It was originally a unified work written by a single author who lived long after the Babylonians' invasion of Jerusalem and the exile (**2 Kings 24-25**). Ezra-Nehemiah picks up some fifty years later and tells of the return of some Israelites to Jerusalem, as well as what happened when they rebuilt their lives and the city." Mackie, Timothy P. *Read Scripture: Illustrated Summaries of Biblical Books*. The Bible Project, 2017. 30

² Kidner, Derek. *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*. InterVarsity Press; IVP Academic, 2009. 53

greeted the king for all their colleagues—the judges and local leaders, the people of Tarpel, the Persians, the Babylonians, and the people of Erech and Susa (that is, Elam). 10 They also sent greetings from the rest of the people whom the great and noble Ashurbanipal had deported and relocated in Samaria and throughout the neighboring lands of the province west of the Euphrates River. 11 This is a copy of their letter:

“To King Artaxerxes, from your loyal subjects in the province west of the Euphrates River. 12 “The king should know that the Jews who came here to Jerusalem from Babylon are rebuilding this rebellious and evil city. They have already laid the foundation and will soon finish its walls. 13 And the king should know that if this city is rebuilt and its walls are completed, it will be much to your disadvantage, for the Jews will then refuse to pay their tribute, customs, and tolls to you.

4 “Since we are your loyal subjects and do not want to see the king dishonored in this way, we have sent the king this information. 15 We suggest that a search be made in your ancestors’ records, where you will discover what a rebellious city this has been in the past. In fact, it was destroyed because of its long and troublesome history of revolt against the kings and countries who controlled it. 16 We declare to the king that if this city is rebuilt and its walls are completed, the province west of the Euphrates River will be lost to you.”

17 Then King Artaxerxes sent this reply:

“To Rehum the governor, Shimshai the court secretary, and their colleagues living in Samaria and throughout the province west of the Euphrates River. Greetings.

18 “The letter you sent has been translated and read to me. 19 I ordered a search of the records and have found that Jerusalem has indeed been a hotbed of insurrection against many kings. In fact, rebellion and revolt are normal there! 20 Powerful kings have ruled over Jerusalem and the entire province west of the Euphrates River, receiving tribute, customs, and tolls.

21 Therefore, issue orders to have these men stop their work. That city must not be rebuilt except at my express command. 22 Be diligent, and don’t neglect this matter, for we must not permit the situation to harm the king’s interests.”

23 When this letter from King Artaxerxes was read to Rehum, Shimshai, and their colleagues, they hurried to Jerusalem. Then, with a show of

strength, they forced the Jews to stop building.

24 So the work on the Temple of God in Jerusalem had stopped, and it remained at a standstill until the second year of the reign of King Darius of Persia.



Let's take some time to look at what is happening in **Ezra 4**.³ What did the enemies of Judah and Benjamin⁴ propose? (**Ezra 4:1-2**)



What was the response of Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the other leaders of Israel? (**4:3**)



Why do you think Zerubbabel and the others declined their "assistance"?⁵

³In the book of Ezra, post-exile, the two kingdoms were no longer split; therefore, the people were sometimes referred to as Judah, sometimes as Israel, sometimes as Jews, and sometimes as the children of God. All of these names refer to the same group of people.

⁴The enemies of Judah and Benjamin were people who had been relocated in the northern kingdom when Assyria conquered Israel (see **2 Kings 17**) ... a mixed group whose ancestors had been conquered by the Assyrians. Foreigners had been forced to resettle in the northern kingdom of Israel after Israel was defeated and her people taken captive in 722 BC. This resettlement procedure was a common tactic of the Assyrians to prevent strong nationalistic uprisings by conquered peoples. Some of the resettled people in Israel had migrated south near Jerusalem, and they may have thought the returning exiles threatened their claim on the land." *Life Application Study Bible: New Living Translation*, Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2014. 726, 725

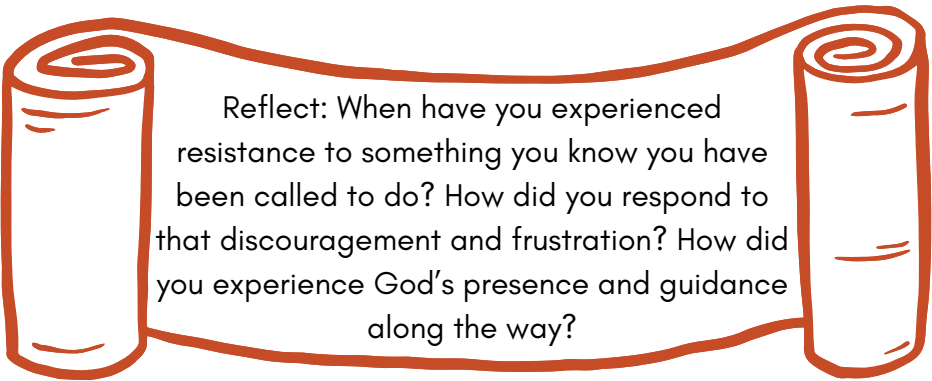
⁵"In an attempt to infiltrate and disrupt the project, these people offered to help in the rebuilding project. They wanted to keep a close eye on what the Jews were doing. They were hoping to keep Jerusalem from becoming strong again." *Life Application Study Bible: New Living Translation*, Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2014. 726



The local residents of Jerusalem tried to discourage and frighten the people and stop the work on the Temple. It may have been up to ten years that the Israelites weren't able to work on the Temple.⁶ How do you think the Israelites felt?



How would you have felt and responded?



⁶Life Application Study Bible: New Living Translation, Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2014. 729



Chapter 4 of Ezra states that the enemies of Judah then participated in a letter writing campaign against the Israelites. They sent a letter to Xerxes and then to King Artaxerxes during his reign. In your own words, summarize what this letter said. (**Ezra 4:11-16**)



The enemies of Judah succeeded in getting what they wanted. How would you explain the way that Artaxerxes responded? (**Ezra 4:17-22**)



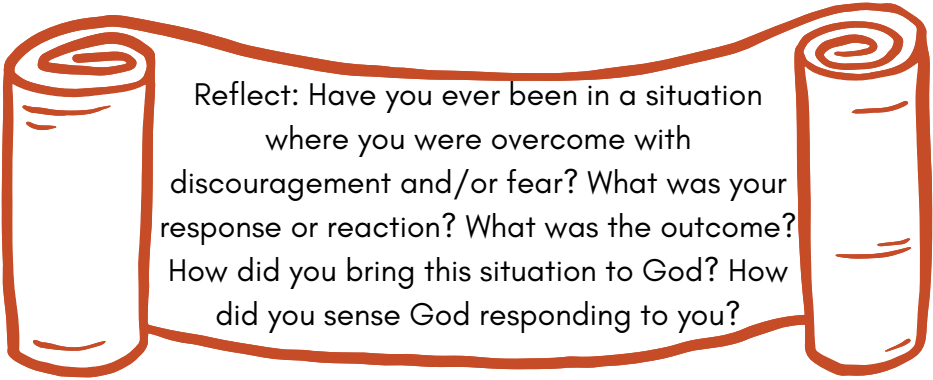
What was the final outcome of this letter?⁷ (**Ezra 4:23**)



How do you think the people of Israel felt knowing lies had been told about them to the point that they had been forced to stop doing what God had asked them to do?

⁷"For about sixteen years, [until] 520 BC, the pressure against [the Israelites] was kept up, and as verse 23 will show, it was wholly effective." Kidner, Derek. *Ezra and Nehemiah: An Introduction and Commentary*. InterVarsity Press; IVP Academic, 2009. 56

"Discouragement and fear are two of the greatest obstacles to completing God's work. Most often they come when you least expect them. Discouragement eats away at our motivation and fear paralyzes us so we don't act at all. Recognize these common barriers. Remember that God's people in every age have faced these problems and with God's help have overcome. By standing together with other believers, you can overcome fear and discouragement and fulfill God's purposes for your life."⁸



Reflect: Have you ever been in a situation where you were overcome with discouragement and/or fear? What was your response or reaction? What was the outcome? How did you bring this situation to God? How did you sense God responding to you?



Read the following verses. Underline, highlight, or circle the truths you observe.

John 16:33

[Jesus said], "I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world."

⁸ *Life Application Study Bible: New Living Translation*, Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2014. 728

Ephesians 6:10-12

*10 A final word: Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.
11 Put on all of God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil. 12 For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places.*

Hebrews 4:14-16

14 So then, since we have a great High Priest who has entered heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to what we believe. 15 This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. 16 So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most.



Where do you find hope and encouragement in these verses?



How can persevering through opposition help us point people to Jesus and reflect God's peace to our city?



Discipleship Pathway

Whether you find yourself in a place of “Freedom and Purpose,” “Unsettled and Questioning,” or any of the other stages of the Discipleship Pathway journey, we all face obstacles and roadblocks along the way.

Last week, we read and wrote psalms of praise. The book of Psalms is also full of times when people in hard or unfair circumstances cried out to God. While they don’t pull any punches about the reality of their experience, they always end by trusting God. Take some time to express your feelings to God using the prompts below to shape your thoughts and feelings.

Start with Your Feelings

Write: God, I feel...

(Share what’s on your heart.)

Acknowledge Who God Is

Write: But, You are...

(List truths about God—like His kindness, presence, or justice.)

Decide on Your Next Steps

Write: So, I will...

(Think about how you’ll move forward or stay faithful.)

Repeat as Needed

Feel free to go through this process multiple times. It’s a way to express, reflect, and find hope.



SERMON NOTES



PRAYER REQUESTS

JOY IN THE COMPLETION OF GOD'S WORK

Lesson 4

Ezra 6:13-22

Before we jump into this week's passage, let's look at what took place in **Ezra 5** and **6:1-12**. At the end of **Ezra 4**, work on the Temple had come to a halt. In **Ezra 5**, during the reign of King Darius, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah encouraged the Jews to resume construction of the Temple under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Jeshua. Their work caught the attention of Tattenai, the Persian governor of the region, who questioned their authority to rebuild and wrote to King Darius for verification. In response, Darius ordered a search of the archives, where they discovered Cyrus' original decree. The decree confirmed the authorization to rebuild the Temple, specified its dimensions, ordered the return of Temple vessels, and provided funding from the royal treasury. Darius then commanded Tattenai to not only allow the construction, but also to support it with royal revenues and provide the necessary materials for sacrifices.



Read Ezra 6:13-22

13 Tattenai, governor of the province west of the Euphrates River, and Shethar-bozenai and their colleagues complied at once with the command of King Darius. 14 So the Jewish elders continued their work, and they were greatly encouraged by the preaching of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah son of Iddo. The Temple was finally finished, as had been commanded by the God of Israel and decreed by Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes, the kings of Persia. 15 The Temple was completed on March 12, during the sixth year of King Darius's reign.

16 The Temple of God was then dedicated with great joy by the people of Israel, the priests, the Levites, and the rest of the people who had returned from exile. 17 During the dedication ceremony for the Temple of God, 100 young bulls, 200 rams, and 400 male lambs were sacrificed. And 12 male goats were presented as a sin offering for the twelve tribes of Israel. 18 Then the priests and Levites were divided into their various

divisions to serve at the Temple of God in Jerusalem, as prescribed in the Book of Moses.

19 On April 21 the returned exiles celebrated Passover. 20 The priests and Levites had purified themselves and were ceremonially clean. So they slaughtered the Passover lamb for all the returned exiles, for their fellow priests, and for themselves. 21 The Passover meal was eaten by the people of Israel who had returned from exile and by the others in the land who had turned from their corrupt practices to worship the Lord, the God of Israel. 22 Then they celebrated the Festival of Unleavened Bread for seven days. There was great joy throughout the land because the Lord had caused the king of Assyria to be favorable to them, so that he helped them to rebuild the Temple of God, the God of Israel.



What happened once the governor of the province allowed them to continue rebuilding the Temple? (6:14-15)



How did the people dedicate the Temple after it was completed? (6:16-18)



After they dedicated the Temple, they celebrated Passover. Who participated in the Passover celebration? (6:19-21)



What do the details in **verse 21** reveal about God’s heart for repentance and inclusion?



“Unlike the First Temple dedication, no fire of God consumes the offerings in the dedication of the Second Temple, and no ark of the covenant is present within the adytum.¹ Nevertheless, God’s pleasure with the temple effort is evident already from the laying of its foundations, and he affirms his presence there (**Haggai 2:3-5**).”²

3 ‘Does anyone remember this house—this Temple—in its former splendor? How, in comparison, does it look to you now? It must seem like nothing at all! 4 But now the Lord says: Be strong, Zerubbabel. Be strong, Jeshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people still left in the land. And now get to work, for I am with you, says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies. 5 My Spirit remains among you, just as I promised when you came out of Egypt. So do not be afraid.’

How do you think this affirmation encouraged the Israelites?



When have you been reminded to focus on what God is doing now instead of hoping for a repeat of the past?

¹The innermost sanctuary of a temple.

²Harrington, Hannah K. *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2022.



God's message through Haggai was a reminder that He was with them and to not be afraid. This message is still applicable today. "There's a reason that scripture warns so often and so forcefully against fear: It is just as powerful as faith. But whereas faith keeps our eyes steadily fixed on the eternal, fear disrupts us, disorients us, drives us to prioritize the here and now. Faith is about preserving our place in the body of Christ; fear is about protecting our own flesh and blood."³

How have you seen God's presence combat fear in your life?



In the lives of those around you?



How can we help bring more of God's presence to our spheres of influence in order to help combat fear?



Underline or circle how the verses on the next page expand on God's encouragement of faith over fear:

³Alberta, Tim. *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism*.

Isaiah 41:10

*Don't be afraid, for I am with you.
Don't be discouraged, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you.
I will hold you up with my victorious right hand.*

Psalms 23:4

*Even when I walk
through the darkest valley,
I will not be afraid,
for you are close beside me.
Your rod and your staff
protect and comfort me.*

Psalms 46:1-3

*1 God is our refuge and strength,
always ready to help in times of trouble.
2 So we will not fear when earthquakes come
and the mountains crumble into the sea.
3 Let the oceans roar and foam.
Let the mountains tremble as the waters surge!*

John 14:27

"I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid.

Hebrews 13:6

*So we can say with confidence,
"The Lord is my helper,
so I will have no fear.
What can mere people do to me?"*

1 John 4:18

Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love.



What was the sweeping/all-encompassing result of the rebuilt Temple? (6:22)⁴



When have you experienced joy after completing something God called you to do?

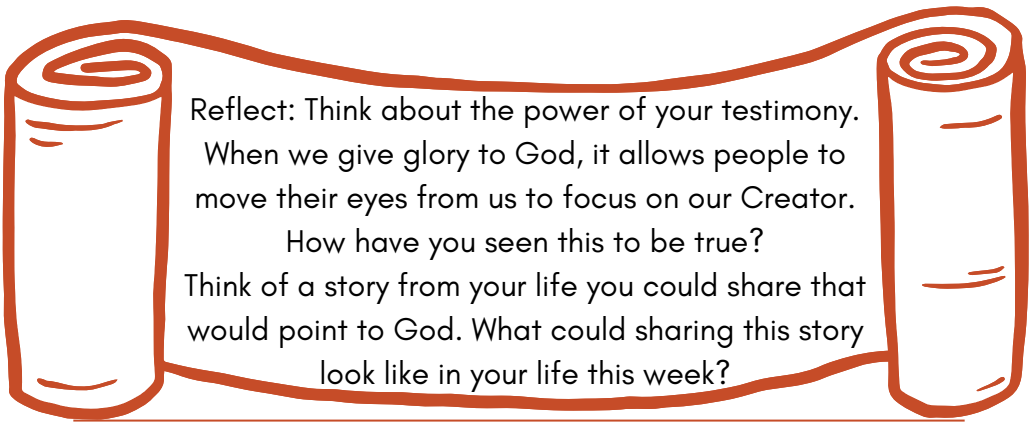


What would/could it look like for our church community to experience sweeping joy? Our city?



How could our celebrations point others to God?

⁴The temple's completion was a time of great excitement for the Jews. The prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah regarding the new temple had been fulfilled. The seventy years of exile prophesied by Jeremiah, if counting from the destruction of the First Temple to the completion of the Second Temple, were officially over. The time of chastisement was finished, and the eye of Yahweh was once again on his people to bless them." Harrington, Hannah K. *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2022. 184





Discipleship Pathway

As we studied last week, getting to this point in the rebuilding of the Temple was a very long and difficult process, full of many great challenges.

In our journey on the pathway, one of the most difficult but fruitful phases is what we call “Surrender and Healing.” In this phase of the journey, we do have experiences of fear and trepidation, but we are becoming less and less afraid because of how God is leading. We are experiencing a pivotal moment when we feel drawn to surrender—knowing it will not be easy, but it will be worthwhile.

As you consider places of fear in your life, take some time to ask yourself the questions on the next page:

In what ways are you trying to bring about change simply through your own self-effort?

In what ways are you learning to let go of control and surrender to God's will?

Consider reading the prayer of relinquishment below as you process:

○ Lord, how do I let go when I'm so unsure of things?

I'm unsure of your will, and I'm unsure of myself.

That really isn't the problem at all, is it?

The truth of the matter is I hate the very idea of letting go.

I really want to be in control.

No, I need to be in control.

That's it, isn't it?

I'm afraid to give up control, afraid of what might happen.

Heal my fear, Lord.

How good of you to reveal my blind spots even in the midst of my

stumbling attempts to pray.

Thank you!

But now what do I do?

How do I give up control?

Jesus, please, teach me your way of relinquishment. Amen

(Taken from Richard Foster's book, *Prayer*)



SERMON NOTES



PRAYER REQUESTS

LEADERSHIP THAT HONORS GOD

Lesson 5

Ezra 7:1-10

Last week, we read about the completion and dedication of the Temple and the great joy that it brought to the people of Israel (**Ezra 6:13-22**). Beginning in **chapter 7**, we jump ahead about fifty-eight years to where we are first introduced to Ezra. Ezra was a well-versed teacher and scribe from a long line of loyal priests, dedicated to teaching the Law of the Lord to the people of Israel. This jump ahead in time also changes our focus from “the physical rebuilding of the temple... [to] a spiritual rebuilding”¹ for the returned exiles that will continue through the end of the book of Ezra.



Read Ezra 7:1-10

1 Many years later, during the reign of King Artaxerxes of Persia, there was a man named Ezra. He was the son of Seraiah, son of Azariah, son of Hilkiah, 2 son of Shallum, son of Zadok, son of Ahitub, 3 son of Amariah, son of Azariah, son of Meraioth, 4 son of Zerariah, son of Uzzi, son of Bukki, 5 son of Abishua, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the high priest. 6 This Ezra was a scribe who was well versed in the Law of Moses, which the Lord, the God of Israel, had given to the people of Israel. He came up to Jerusalem from Babylon, and the king gave him everything he asked for, because the gracious hand of the Lord his God was on him. 7 Some of the people of Israel, as well as some of the priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and Temple servants, traveled up to Jerusalem with him in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes' reign.

8 Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in August of that year. 9 He had arranged to leave Babylon on April 8, the first day of the new year, and he arrived at Jerusalem on August 4, for the gracious hand of his God was on him. 10 This was because Ezra had determined to study and obey the Law of the Lord and to teach those decrees and regulations to the people of Israel.

¹Petter, Donna Lee, and Thomas D. Petter. *Ezra-Nehemiah*. Zondervan Academic, 2021. 174



Ezra 7:1-5 highlights Ezra’s priestly lineage, tracing it all the way back to Moses’ brother, Aaron, who was the first high priest for Israel (**Exodus 28**). What might be the importance of including this genealogy?²



Ezra understood the value and importance of deeply knowing and being well-versed in the Law of the Lord (**Ezra 7:6**).³ What do you think are some of the values of knowing and studying Scripture?



How do you personally study or immerse yourself in Scripture?



“Placing a premium on God’s Word has the power to bring revival to individuals and churches.”⁴ How have you seen or experienced the power of Scripture in your church? In your community?

²Remember that the genealogies in the Old Testament are always working to communicate multiple layers of information to readers. Genealogies obviously trace family trees, but they also help us follow priestly and royal lines through Israel’s story. “Jesus and Genealogies.” *BibleProject*, 10 Dec. 2024, bibleproject.com/articles/jesus-genealogies/.

³These are the Laws that God gave them as terms of His covenant with them and they are found in the first five books of the Bible—the Torah.

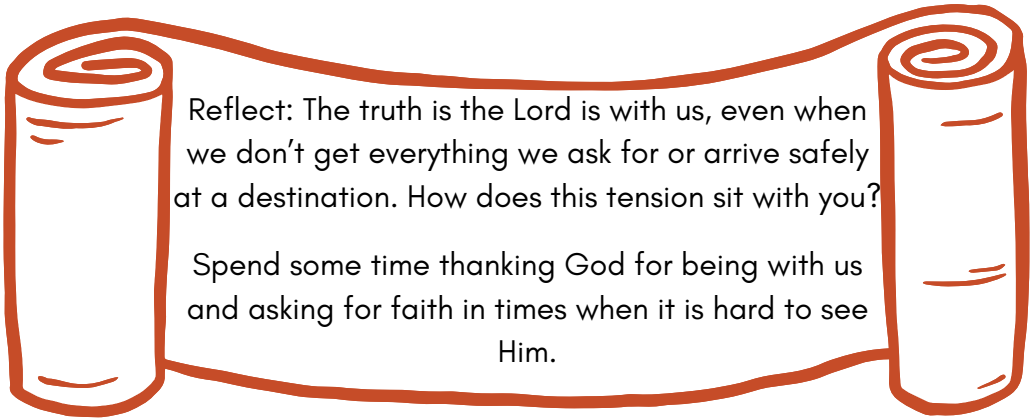
⁴51 Petter, Donna Lee, and Thomas D. Petter. *Ezra-Nehemiah*. Zondervan Academic, 2021. 181



Ezra 7:6 and **7:9** say that the gracious hand of the Lord was on Ezra, which meant the king gave him everything he asked for (**7:6**) and he arrived safely in Jerusalem (**7:9**). Describe what you think it means for the gracious hand of the Lord to be on someone.



What might that look like today?





Ezra was equipped by God and ready to be a godly leader,⁵ who would teach the people of Israel and bring about a spiritual rebuilding. This readiness was shown through his commitment to God and dedication to the Scriptures (**7:6, 10**). What other qualities are important for godly leadership?



What qualities of godly leadership do you see in the following verses:

Romans 16:3-5

3 Give my greetings to Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in the ministry of Christ Jesus. 4 In fact, they once risked their lives for me. I am thankful to them, and so are all the Gentile churches. 5 Also give my greetings to the church that meets in their home. Greet my dear friend Epenetus. He was the first person from the province of Asia to become a follower of Christ.

Philippians 2:1-11

1 Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from his love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts tender and compassionate? 2 Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose. 3 Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. 4 Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too. 5 You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. 6 Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. 7 Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in

⁵"Ezra demonstrates how a gifted Bible teacher can move God's people forward. He was effective because he was a well-versed student of the law of the Lord and because he was determined to obey those laws. He taught through both his speaking and his example." *Life Application Study Bible: New Living*

human form, 8 he humbled himself in obedience to and died a criminal's death on a cross. 9 Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Matthew 25:14-30

14 "Again, the Kingdom of Heaven can be illustrated by the story of a man going on a long trip. He called together his servants and entrusted his money to them while he was gone. 15 He gave five bags of silver to one, two bags of silver to another, and one bag of silver to the last—dividing it in proportion to their abilities. He then left on his trip.

16 "The servant who received the five bags of silver began to invest the money and earned five more. 17 The servant with two bags of silver also went to work and earned two more. 18 But the servant who received the one bag of silver dug a hole in the ground and hid the master's money.

19 "After a long time their master returned from his trip and called them to give an account of how they had used his money. 20 The servant to whom he had entrusted the five bags of silver came forward with five more and said, 'Master, you gave me five bags of silver to invest, and I have earned five more.'

21 "The master was full of praise. 'Well done, my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in handling this small amount, so now I will give you many more responsibilities. Let's celebrate together!'

22 "The servant who had received the two bags of silver came forward and said, 'Master, you gave me two bags of silver to invest, and I have earned two more.'

23 "The master said, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in handling this small amount, so now I will give you many more responsibilities. Let's celebrate together!'

24 "Then the servant with the one bag of silver came and said, 'Master, I knew you were a harsh man, harvesting crops you didn't

plant and gathering crops you didn't cultivate. 25 I was afraid I would lose your money, so I hid it in the earth. Look, here is your money back.' 26 "But the master replied, 'You wicked and lazy servant! If you knew I harvested crops I didn't plant and gathered crops I didn't cultivate, 27 why didn't you deposit my money in the bank? At least I could have gotten some interest on it.' 28 "Then he ordered, 'Take the money from this servant, and give it to the one with the ten bags of silver. 29 To those who use well what they are given, even more will be given, and they will have an abundance. But from those who do nothing, even what little they have will be taken away. 30 Now throw this useless servant into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'



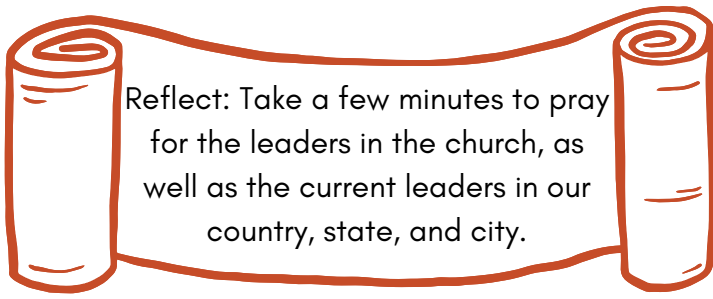
How might God be calling you to grow in one or more of these qualities?



Think about your current spheres of influence and areas of leadership (families, workplaces, communities, schools, etc.). How can you bring the peace, power, and presence of God to these spaces?



Are there any spaces in your community or city that God may be calling you into a new place of leadership? If so, how could you move toward increased engagement?



Reflect: Take a few minutes to pray for the leaders in the church, as well as the current leaders in our country, state, and city.



Discipleship Pathway

The discipleship journey is not a race or a competition. It's an often slow and steady process of intentionally and naturally maturing as we walk with Christ. In the life of Ezra, we can see signs of multiple stages in the Discipleship Pathway, including "Freedom and Purpose" and "A Life of Love and Communion."

Here are some of the descriptions that we might use for this part of the journey:

- Living on mission from a place of wholeness
- Surrendered in God's will
- Calm and stillness
- A life overflowing with unconditional love toward others
- Deep wisdom gained from life's struggles
- Steadfastness in trials
- Detachment from worldly distractions
- Courage, obedience, sacrifice
- A spiritual parent to others
- A sense of mystery and contentment

As you read these descriptions, please don't let them take you to a place of discouragement or self-criticism, rather let them be encouraging—this is what you have to look forward to as you continue your journey with Christ.

Choose two or three of these descriptions that particularly speak to you. You may be experiencing longing or desire for these qualities. Turn this to prayer and invite God to grow these things in you. Invite God to give you a vision of what that growth could look like in the days, months, and years to come.



SERMON NOTES



PRAYER REQUESTS

CONFESSION AND REFORMATION

Lesson 6

Ezra 9:1-15

Before we jump into **Ezra 9**, let's look at what we missed in **Ezra 7:11-8:36**. In these chapters we continue to learn about Ezra, a priest and skilled scribe in the Law of Moses who arrived in Jerusalem around 458 BC—roughly sixty years after the Temple was completed by Zerubbabel's initial group of returning exiles (**Ezra 6**). King Artaxerxes granted Ezra remarkable authority and resources, providing him with a letter authorizing his mission to teach God's law and establish justice in Judah. Ezra assembled a group of Jewish exiles to return with him but discovered no Levites among them. After calling for Levites to join them, he gathered the people at the Ahava Canal where they fasted and prayed for safe passage. Despite carrying valuable treasures for the Temple and having permission to request a military escort, Ezra chose to trust God for protection, having declared to the king that God's hand protects all who seek Him. The journey took four months, and they arrived safely in Jerusalem. Ezra carefully weighed and documented all the Temple treasures they had brought, demonstrating his meticulous attention to stewardship of sacred resources. The successful journey and delivery of the treasures was followed by offerings to God, and the king's orders were delivered to local officials, showing how God orchestrated both spiritual and political support for this mission of religious restoration.



Read Ezra 9:1-15

1 When these things had been done, the Jewish leaders came to me and said, "Many of the people of Israel, and even some of the priests and Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the other peoples living in the land. They have taken up the detestable practices of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians, and Amorites. 2 For the men of Israel have married women from these people and have taken them as wives for their sons. So the holy race has become polluted by these mixed marriages. Worse yet, the leaders and officials

have led the way in this outrage.”

3 When I heard this, I tore my cloak and my shirt, pulled hair from my head and beard, and sat down utterly shocked. 4 Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel came and sat with me because of this outrage committed by the returned exiles. And I sat there utterly appalled until the time of the evening sacrifice.

5 At the time of the sacrifice, I stood up from where I had sat in mourning with my clothes torn. I fell to my knees and lifted my hands to the Lord my God. 6 I prayed,

“O my God, I am utterly ashamed; I blush to lift up my face to you. For our sins are piled higher than our heads, and our guilt has reached to the heavens. 7 From the days of our ancestors until now, we have been steeped in sin. That is why we and our kings and our priests have been at the mercy of the pagan kings of the land. We have been killed, captured, robbed, and disgraced, just as we are today.

8 “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. He has given us security in this holy place. Our God has brightened our eyes and granted us some relief from our slavery. 9 For we were slaves, but in his unfailing love our God did not abandon us in our slavery. Instead, he caused the kings of Persia to treat us favorably. He revived us so we could rebuild the Temple of our God and repair its ruins. He has given us a protective wall in Judah and Jerusalem.

10 “And now, O our God, what can we say after all of this? For once again we have abandoned your commands! 11 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. From one end to the other, the land is filled with corruption. 12 Don’t let your daughters marry their sons! Don’t take their daughters as wives for your sons. Don’t ever promote the peace and prosperity of those nations. If you follow these instructions, you will be strong and will enjoy the good things the land produces, and you will leave this prosperity to your children forever.’

13 “Now we are being punished because of our wickedness and our great guilt. But we have actually been punished far less than we deserve, for you, our God, have allowed some of us to survive as a remnant. 14 But

even so, we are again breaking your commands and intermarrying with people who do these detestable things. Won't your anger be enough to destroy us, so that even this little remnant no longer survives? 15 O Lord, God of Israel, you are just. We come before you in our guilt as nothing but an escaped remnant, though in such a condition none of us can stand in your presence."



What specific complaints did the Jewish leaders bring to Ezra? (9:1-2)



What were Ezra's physical reactions to the news? (9:3-4)



"Opposition to mixed marriages was not racial prejudice because Jews and non-Jews of this area were of the same Semitic background. The reasons were strictly spiritual. A person who married a pagan was inclined to adopt that person's pagan beliefs and practices."¹ What are some situations where Christians might compromise their first allegiance in today's culture?

¹ *Life Application Study Bible: New Living Translation*, Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2014. 737



The rest of the chapter records Ezra's prayer for the people of Israel. Take some time to read **Ezra 9:6-15** below and circle or underline what stands out to you.

6 I prayed, "O my God, I am utterly ashamed; I blush to lift up my face to you. For our sins are piled higher than our heads, and our guilt has reached to the heavens. 7 From the days of our ancestors until now, we have been steeped in sin. That is why we and our kings and our priests have been at the mercy of the pagan kings of the land. We have been killed, captured, robbed, and disgraced, just as we are today.

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Why did those things stick out to you?



How does Ezra describe the people's sins in his prayer?



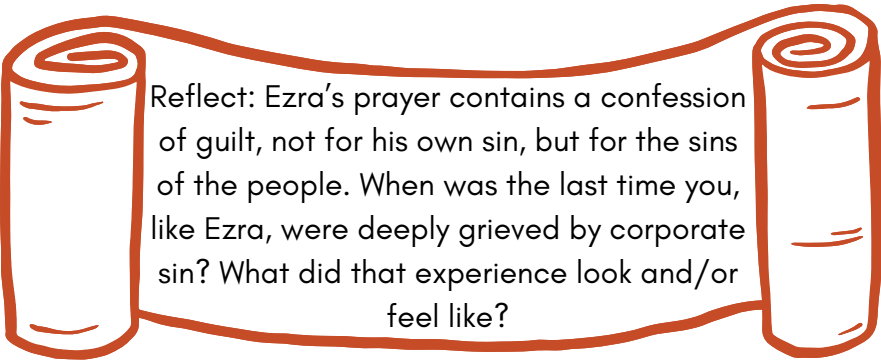
What do you learn about God from Ezra's prayer?



What do you notice about the contrast between God's mercy and "getting what you deserve"?



How have you seen that contrast play out in your personal life or in what you have observed in others?



Reflect: Ezra's prayer contains a confession of guilt, not for his own sin, but for the sins of the people. When was the last time you, like Ezra, were deeply grieved by corporate sin? What did that experience look and/or feel like?



What role should corporate confession play in our spiritual lives? What does that look like in our church? What could it look like?



How can corporate confession and repentance bring peace?



“Ezra’s concern was not primarily with the physical temple, but with the realization in the hearts of his people of the deeper reality the temple signified. He wanted the nations surrounding Israel to see the presence of their God not just in a shiny new temple, but also in the obedient, trusting lives of his people.”² How can we maintain holiness while living in a secular culture?



How can living in a holy way and coming to God with confession and repentance point to God for people who don’t yet know Him?



How can it influence our city to be a city at peace with God?



Discipleship Pathway

Ezra is attempting to move the people from a state of moral and spiritual compromise to a place of “Surrender and Healing.”

Let’s take some time to look at our own state of affairs. As we walk through these steps of prayer, consider a community that you are actively a part of: family, church, friends, etc. Start by asking God some questions and then make note of what comes to mind.

² Williams, Michael. *How to Read the Bible through the Jesus Lens*. 2012. Bible Gateway plus

God, would You reveal an area of sin that we are currently steeped in?
(Wait on the Lord to reveal something you may already know or even something you have been previously blind to.)

God, as I write and speak this prayer, would You remind me of Your grace?

God, as I write and speak this prayer, would You show us steps toward a change of heart and action?

Now, in response to what God is showing you, write a prayer following Ezra's pattern: confession, remembrance of God's grace, and petition. Make it both personal and corporate, owning your part as well as praying on behalf of the community.



SERMON NOTES



PRAYER REQUESTS

TRUE REFORMATION BRINGS LASTING PEACE

Lesson 7

Ezra 10:1-17

This passage of Scripture deals with very difficult decisions and issues. It is important to approach them with cultural sensitivity, a lack of judgmentalism, and grace—relying on the Holy Spirit to help us understand and learn from them. It is also important to remember that not every story in the Bible is telling us what to do ourselves but every story has something God is communicating to us.



Read Ezra 10:1-17

1 While Ezra prayed and made this confession, weeping and lying face down on the ground in front of the Temple of God, a very large crowd of people from Israel—men, women, and children—gathered and wept bitterly with him. 2 Then Shecaniah son of Jehiel, a descendant of Elam, said to Ezra, “We have been unfaithful to our God, for we have married these pagan women of the land. But in spite of this there is hope for Israel. 3 Let us now make a covenant with our God to divorce our pagan wives and to send them away with their children. We will follow the advice given by you and by the others who respect the commands of our God. Let it be done according to the Law of God. 4 Get up, for it is your duty to tell us how to proceed in setting things straight. We are behind you, so be strong and take action.”

5 So Ezra stood up and demanded that the leaders of the priests and the Levites and all the people of Israel swear that they would do as Shecaniah had said. And they all swore a solemn oath. 6 Then Ezra left the front of the Temple of God and went to the room of Jehohanan son of Eliashib. He spent the night there without eating or drinking anything. He was still in mourning because of the unfaithfulness of the returned exiles.

7 Then a proclamation was made throughout Judah and Jerusalem that all the exiles should come to Jerusalem. 8 Those who failed to come within three days would, if the leaders and elders so decided, forfeit all their property and be expelled from the assembly of the exiles.

9 Within three days, all the people of Judah and Benjamin had gathered in Jerusalem. This took place on December 19, and all the people

were sitting in the square before the Temple of God. They were trembling both because of the seriousness of the matter and because it was raining. 10 Then Ezra the priest stood and said to them: "You have committed a terrible sin. By marrying pagan women, you have increased Israel's guilt. 11 So now confess your sin to the Lord, the God of your ancestors, and do what he demands. Separate yourselves from the people of the land and from these pagan women."

12 Then the whole assembly raised their voices and answered, "Yes, you are right; we must do as you say!" 13 Then they added, "This isn't something that can be done in a day or two, for many of us are involved in this extremely sinful affair. And this is the rainy season, so we cannot stay out here much longer. 14 Let our leaders act on behalf of us all. Let everyone who has a pagan wife come at a scheduled time, accompanied by the leaders and judges of his city, so that the fierce anger of our God concerning this affair may be turned away from us."

15 Only Jonathan son of Asahel and Jahzeiah son of Tikvah opposed this course of action, and they were supported by Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite.

16 So this was the plan they followed. Ezra selected leaders to represent their families, designating each of the representatives by name. On December 29, the leaders sat down to investigate the matter. 17 By March 27, the first day of the new year, they had finished dealing with all the men who had married pagan wives.



From **verse 1**, what happened after Ezra prayed?



Summarize Shecaniah's confession from **verses 2-4**.



What stands out to you from his confession? Why?



How does Shecaniah's response (**verses 2-4**) demonstrate both repentance and hope?



What are your thoughts about the solution that Shecaniah suggested (**10:3**) and Ezra supported? (**10:5**)

The people agreed to this difficult solution, and Ezra organized a systematic process to address the situation:

- A proclamation was made requiring all exiles to gather in Jerusalem within three days (**10:7-8**)
- The assembly met in December, despite heavy rain (**10:9**)
- Ezra instructed the whole assembly to confess their sins and to separate themselves from the pagan women (**10:10-11**)
- The people agreed and leaders were appointed to investigate each case (**10:12-14**)
- The process took about three months (from December 19 to March 27) (**10:16**)
- Only four men opposed this course of action (**10:15**)

This chapter/historical narrative can cause some dissonance as we view the way the wives and children were treated. While there is no way to definitively explain it away, the quotes below may help provide some understanding:

“Why were the men commanded to send away their wives and children? Although the measure was extreme, intermarriage to pagans was strictly forbidden (**Deuteronomy 7:3, 4**). Even the priests and Levites had intermarried, which could be compared today to a Christian marrying a devil worshiper. Although a severe solution, it only involved 113 of the approximately 29,000 families.

“Ezra’s strong act, though very difficult for some, was necessary to preserve Israel as a nation committed to God. Some of the exiles of the northern kingdom of Israel had lost both their spiritual and physical identity through intermarriage. Their pagan spouses had caused the people to worship idols. Ezra did not want this to happen to the exiles of the southern kingdom of Israel.”²

“Following Ezra’s earnest prayer, the people confessed their sin to God. Then they asked for direction in restoring their relationship with God. True repentances does not end with words of confession—that would be mere lip service. It must lead to changed attitudes and behavior.”³

“This story is strange for a number of reasons. God never commanded Ezra to do any of this. It was the leaders of Jerusalem who compelled Ezra to make the decree. While the contemporary prophet Malachi did say that the exiles should care about purity, he went on to say that God was opposed to divorce (see **Malachi 2:13-16**). The mixed results of the decree fit well into this pattern of strange, disappointing endings. ... While the book ends on a downer, we are forced to keep reading to find out how God is going to fulfill his great covenant promises.”⁴

²Life Application Study Bible: New Living Translation, Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2014. 738

³Life Application Study Bible: New Living Translation, Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2014. 739

⁴Mackie, Timothy P. *Read Scripture: Illustrated Summaries of Biblical Books*. The Bible Project, 2017. 30



What strikes you as most challenging about this passage?



How do we discern between natural and good cultural adaptation and spiritual compromise?



What principles can we draw from this passage about leading through difficult changes?



How can we maintain both truth and grace when addressing sin in our community?



How can confession and repentance bring us to a place of peace with God?



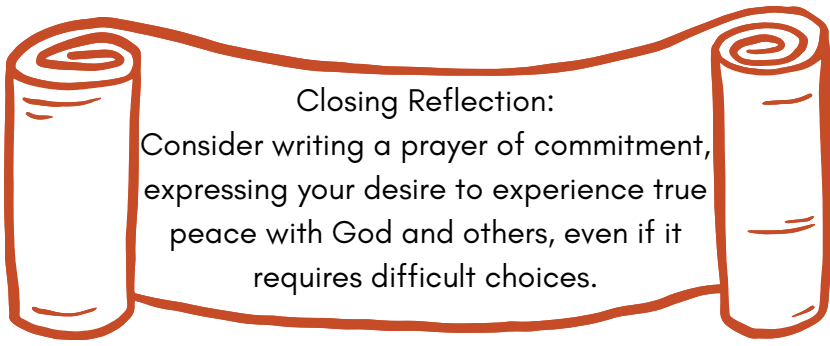
What does it mean to you to be at peace with God—how would you describe it in your own words?



How can being at peace with God help our city be a city at peace with God?

(For example: when we have peace with God ourselves, we are able to be the non-anxious presence in the room of chaos and stress.)

The book of Ezra ends with a mandate for those with pagan wives to divorce them and abandon their children—not a very uplifting end to the story. Even if you read Nehemiah, it doesn't end well. While the people returned to their homeland and worked to rebuild the Temple, human ambition and desire weren't enough. But the story wasn't over. Even the disheartening pieces of the puzzle point to Jesus. It is only through Jesus that we are able to experience true peace and restoration, which means that though Ezra doesn't have the happy ending we desire, through Jesus we can experience His peace and restoration as we seek first His Kingdom both now and ultimately when Jesus returns and we get to experience eternity with Him.



Closing Reflection:
Consider writing a prayer of commitment,
expressing your desire to experience true
peace with God and others, even if it
requires difficult choices.



Discipleship Pathway

As the Israelites continued toward “Surrender and Healing,” there are some very concrete steps and plans that are made in order to experience needed change.

Read this expanded quote again. As you do, begin to ask God about any needed changes He might be inviting you to make.

“Following Ezra’s earnest prayer, the people confessed their sin to God. Then they asked for direction in restoring their relationship with God. True repentances does not end with words of confession—that would be mere lip service. It must lead to changed attitudes and behavior. When you sin and are truly sorry, confess this to God, ask his forgiveness, and accept his grace and mercy. Then, as an act of thankfulness for your forgiveness, make the needed corrections.”⁵

⁵Life Application Study Bible: New Living Translation, Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2014. 739

As we think about the communal nature of the changes made by the Israelites, consider your own community. Is there a group or person who might be willing to join you in what God is revealing to you?

Now, take some time to work your way through these prompts.

What attitudes and/or behaviors is God inviting me to change?

Who will I tell about these changes as I seek to live confessionally in community?

Who will I invite to join me in these changes?

How could these changes impact my community?

How are you experiencing God's kindness and grace in this process of confession and change?

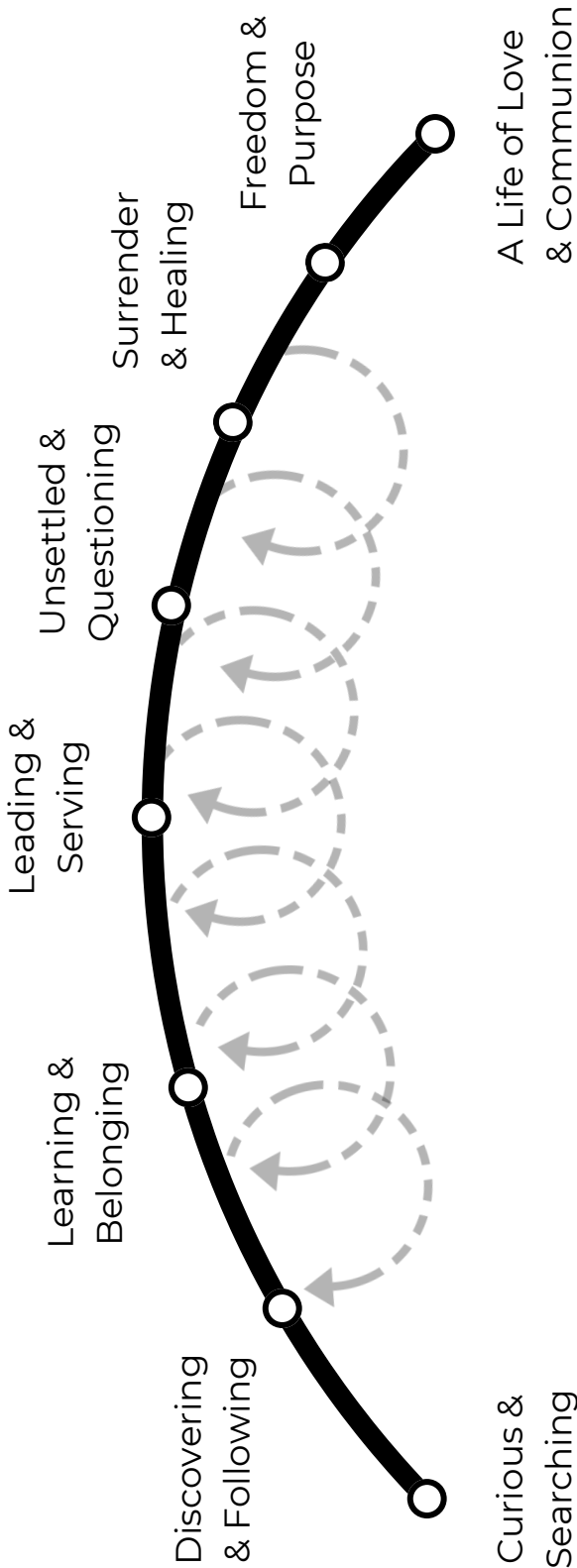


SERMON NOTES



PRAYER REQUESTS

THE DISCIPLESHIP PATHWAY



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