



# RETURN

A Story of Redemption

## Introduction

**Let's End Strong.** Welcome back to Small Group for our last session of the 2017-2018 small group season. The goal of this session is to end strong. There are 8 weeks of small group remaining. I encourage you to work hard to gather your group, so the end of your small group season isn't a slow declining trickle, but more of a grand hurrah!

**Don't Stop Building Your Group.** Consider pursuing some new people for your group. If you would like to have a few more in your group, go out and ask someone. There are many who would benefit from a group who don't join because no one asked them. The worst thing that can happen is they say no.

**Growing in the Inductive Method.** Take some time, as you prepare the lesson, to ask your own questions about each passage. You may have different questions than the ones asked in the book, and that is a good thing. Write them down and insert them where appropriate. Asking good questions from the Bible is very important, and it is quite possible that your questions resonate better with your group than the ones in the study guide.

**Look for Action.** James says, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." When we start doing what God wants, we will see him take our baby-steps of faithfulness and turn them into something much greater than we could do on our own.

**Don't Talk Too Much.** A last reminder for your group – a good leader is one who is asking good questions and then stepping out of the way. People are prone to taking the path of least resistance. This means they would rather you answer their questions than think

it through themselves. Instead of answering, ask, "What do you all think about that question?"

**A Note Chapter 4.** Chapter 4:7-23 is non-chronological. Lazy people like to think Ezra made a mistake. But there is actually a really cool reason why it is laid out like this.

If you look at chapter 4, you will see that the beginning speaks of Cyrus' decree. The end of the passage talks about Darius' reign. In between you have the details of a decree from Artaxerxes.

What you maybe didn't know, is that the order of kings was Cyrus, Darius, Xerxes, and then Artaxerxes. Artaxerxes' reign was many decades later. Ezra did not make a mistake! It would be like one of us making the mistake that Harry Truman's presidency came after George Bush's. No. Ezra knew what he was doing.

Ezra puts this account here to make a point. He is saying, "Long ago, adversaries tried to keep us from building the temple. But look! The temple is completed. Now, adversaries are trying to keep us from rebuilding the wall and city. But we know that, just as God in the past gave us success with the temple, he will give us success with the wall."

I included this note because if you are digging into this book, you're going to be confused. It's confusing enough that the Jewish Encyclopedia Online says that Ezra simply made a mistake. However, many scholars disagree and say there was a reason for him to include this part non-chronologically.

## **“Return of the Exiles”**

## **Week 1**

Ezra 1:1-11

April 8, 2018

**Icebreaker question.** Let each person answer this question as we get to know each other: “What is your favorite T.V. show?”

**Prayer (now or end of study).** Spend some time sharing prayer requests, and have each person pray for the person on their left.

**Studying the word.** *Ask God to guide your study of His Word.*

### **OBSERVATION & INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS**

*Context & History: Cyrus became king of Anshan in 559 B.C. After various victories over kings of the Ancient Near East and Asia Minor, he took Sardis in 546 B.C. He fought with great success against the Babylonians in 539 B.C., and his general conquered Babylon in 539. “The first year of Cyrus” refers to the first year of the conquering of Babylon when he became king of Mesopotamia.*

*Also of note: the “70 years of Exile” does not refer to the time the Israelites spent in Babylon, because 539 is only 48 years after the deportation of the first temple. The “70 years of Exile” refers to the period between the destruction of the first temple and reconstruction of the second, 70 years later.*

1. Have someone read Ezra 1:1-11.
2. What compelled Cyrus to send the Jews back to Jerusalem?

**It was the Lord who led Cyrus to do this (verse 1).**

3. What does it mean for Cyrus to build The Lord a “house?” (Compare to 2 Samuel 7:5 for help).

**This refers to rebuilding the temple.**

4. How do you reconcile the interaction of God's sovereign power and man's free will? Cyrus is an example – he was a human being with his own will, and yet he was an instrument of God's greater purpose.

This is a great mystery. God's word teaches both human responsibility and God's sovereignty. Luke 22:22 is a great example of both halves being taught in the same verse. "For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed!" God sovereignly determined Jesus to be betrayed, but Judas is also responsible for his actions.

5. What is the main idea of verses 6-11?

These verses focus on the wealth that is given to the people who are returning to Jerusalem.

6. In verse 6, who assisted the exiles with goods for their return to Jerusalem?

It says, "And all who were about them." It seems like even their non-Jewish neighbors aided them on their way. It makes you wonder if the Jews blessed their city so well, that they earned so much good-will, that their neighbors were happy to help them on their way. Or else, maybe it was just the Lord's providence. Or both.

7. How would you describe their gifts to the Jewish people?
8. Is there a connection between God's financial blessing and his spiritual purpose? Why or why not?

I am convinced that God will always provide what is needed to accomplish his purposes, whether it is manpower, money, space, or something else. As a result, I am also convinced that when God

pours out financial blessing on you that it is a sign he wants to help you continue what you are doing. It can be a sign that you are in his will.

I wouldn't go too far on this... and we should never make the mistake of trusting in money or looking to money as a signpost that we are doing his will. We judge that against Scripture.

9. Read the following verses: Psalm 50:10, Philippians 4:19, Psalm 112:3, Psalm 24:1-2. What do we learn about God and money?
10. Finally, look up Proverbs 11:28. How should this verse caution us?

### **QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION**

1. Do you believe that God is in charge of international politics? Do you believe he is in charge of the course of human history on a grand scale? How could believing this help you trust him?
2. How is God's sovereignty over human actors an encouragement? How does it give you hope?
3. Do you find it hard to trust God with money? Why or why not?
4. Do you know that God can give you what you need to accomplish his purposes?
5. What are some ways that you could grow in faith of trusting God with money?

**“Return Isn’t Easy”****Week 2**

Ezra 4:1-24

April 15, 2018

**Icebreaker question.** Let each person answer this question as we get to know each other: “What is your favorite birthday memory?”

**Prayer (now or end of study).** Spend some time thinking of people in your places of work or community that could use prayer, and then lift them up to God.

**Studying the word.** *Ask God to guide your study of His Word.*

**OBSERVATION & INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS**

*Summary of Chapter 3: The Jewish people returned to Jerusalem and established an altar, where they began to worship God according to the Law of Moses. After being there a year, they began to rebuild the temple as well. They even paid carpenters and masons to begin rebuilding the foundation of the temple...*

1. Have someone read Ezra 4.
2. Why wouldn't the Jewish people allow the “adversaries of Judah and Benjamin” to help rebuild the temple?

Perhaps the Jewish people knew their true intentions from the beginning. It could be that they didn't want to intermingle with foreign nations, as they were commanded not to by Moses. It could also be that they were trying to obey the command of king Cyrus, which is how the Scripture says they responded.

3. What was the response of the “people of the land” (verse 4)?

They began to “discourage” the people. This probably involved threats; it certainly involved bribes.

4. Verse 6 tells the story of something that happened during Artaxerxes' reign (Ahasuerus is the same person as Artaxerxes). Where does this story fall chronologically compared to Cyrus and Darius reign? (You will need a study Bible to help you figure this out).
  - a. There is a long note in the leader's guide to help understand the chronology of these verses, and the reasoning. It is in the introduction to the leader's guide.
5. What do you observe in the letter that the adversaries sent to Artaxerxes?
6. What do you notice in the letter that was returned to the adversaries from Artaxerxes?
7. Do you think it is true that the Jewish people were "seditious and rebellious" in the past? Which parts of the letter seemed true to you... which parts seemed false?

It is certainly true that mighty kings had come from Jerusalem, and that they had had tribute paid to them. Whether they were seditious and rebellious is much more debatable... it seems to me they were simply defeated in war.

The ancient adversaries of the Jewish people who still lived in the land were afraid of the Jewish people regaining power, and so they cast them in the worst possible light. But it is interesting that when Ahasuerus looked at his official archives (verse 19), that he came to agree with the adversaries!

8. Why does the Bible record the political intrigue regarding God's people and their adversaries?

### **QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION**

1. How relevant is political power struggle to the kingdom of God today?



As a leader, try not to let this conversation become too partisan!!

I would encourage you to consider this from two angles. On the one hand, Jesus seemed to avoid spreading his kingdom through a human kingship, or through a position of power. On the other hand, Paul taught us to pray “for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.”

2. Philippians 3:18 says, “For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.”
  - a. How does knowing there are enemies of the cross shape your expectations on life?
  - b. How should we feel towards enemies of God?
  - c. What do we learn about how enemies of God will attack the church? Attack his people?
  - d. Can you think of any Scriptural teachings that give us hope against enemies of the cross?
  - e. How should we treat enemies of the cross?
  - f. What can we do to make sure our hearts do not become embittered toward God's enemies?

On this last point, we should always remember John Newton's words in *Amazing Grace*. “How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.” We would be like them were it not for his grace.

3. Have someone read 1 Peter 2:12. What can you do this week to obey this verse?

**“Return to Work”****Week 3**

Haggai 2:1-9

April 22, 2018

**Icebreaker question.** Let each person answer this question as we get to know each other: “What is your favorite restaurant?”

**Prayer (now or end of study).** Spend some time praying for youth and children. Pray for children you are related to (sons, daughters, grandchildren, etc.) Pray for local schools and school-districts.

**Studying the word.** *Ask God to guide your study of His Word.*

**OBSERVATION & INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS**

*Historical Note: The book of Ezra records that Haggai prophesied to the returning exiles. So we are going to take one week to look at the message of Haggai.*

1. Read Haggai 2:1-9 aloud.
2. In verse 3, Haggai asks them to compare the current temple with Solomon's prior temple, which was destroyed. Read Ezra 3:12. What is the difference between the new temple and the old temple?

**The Old Temple (constructed by Solomon) was so much better than when they looked at the New Temple, they wept for their loss.**

3. Put yourself in their shoes. How would you be feeling as you embarked on the mission to build a new temple?
4. What commands does Haggai give as he prophesies to the exiles? (verses 4 and 5)

**They were commanded to keep working, be strong, and not to fear.**

5. What promises does Haggai deliver to the people from God as they continue to work?

God told them he was with them. The Spirit remains in their midst. They need to remember the covenant that God made with them when they came out of Egypt. This is a reference to Exodus 19, that if they will obey God's commandments, they will be God's treasured possession.

6. What do you notice about the work of the Spirit, even here in the Old Testament?
7. Assume for a moment that ultimate fulfillment of the prophecy in verses 6-9 is fulfilled in Christ.
  - a. How does that happen? Read 1 Corinthians 3:16.
  - b. How is the reference to silver and gold being given to God from all the nations fulfilled in Christ?

It is pretty neat to think that, although they rebuilt the temple, God's ultimate plan was that he would build himself a holy temple through and inside you and me, by the Spirit who dwells inside of us. This temple is greater in glory and power than the temple in Jerusalem, for the scope of its influence is no longer limited by geography.

Also, as the Gospel goes forth to the nations, God is receiving the riches and tributes from every corner of the earth!

### **QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION**

1. What is the main work that God has called a Christian to, today?
2. When the Jewish people saw the foundation of the new temple compared to the old, they cried.
  - a. Are there times when you are convinced the future can never be as good as the past?

- b. Is there any way that you mourn the state of the church today compared with the past?
  - c. How does a passage like this encourage you that God has a glorious future for his people even today?
3. Which of God's promises in this passage do you need to hear today? Why?
4. What particular task has God laid before you, for which he says to you, "Be strong! Do not fear! Work hard!"
5. What do we learn about God's character in this passage?

## **“Return Through The Help of Others” Week 4**

Ezra 4:24-5:17, 6:13-18

April 29, 2018

**Icebreaker question.** Let each person answer this question as we get to know each other: “What characteristics do you admire (in self or others)?”

**Prayer (now or end of study).** Think about and pray for our national leaders, our state leaders, and our local leaders in government.

**Studying the word.** *Ask God to guide your study of His Word.*

### **OBSERVATION & INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS**

*Note: We are also going to look at Ezra 6:13-18.*

1. Read Ezra 4:24 – Ezra 5:17.
2. Look carefully at Ezra 4:24. What key change resulted in the temple being rebuilt?
3. What role does Tattenai have over the land of Israel?
4. Compare Tattenai’s letter, recorded in verses 5:6-17, with the letter sent by the adversaries in 4:11-16.
  - a. Which letter seems more objective?
  - b. Which letter seems more truthful?
  - c. Who influenced the writing of the other letter? (4:6)

**The adversaries of the Jews, the people of the land.**

- d. Who influenced the writing of the second letter? (5:4)

**Tattenai asked the Jewish people for their input prior to writing the letter.**

5. Now read Ezra 6:13-18.
6. What is the importance of the prophetic activity of Zechariah and Haggai? Look at 6:14.

It was through the prophets that their work prospered. They needed the Lord's word to guide and encourage them.

7. Was the encouragement of Haggai and Zechariah essential to the completion of the project? Why or why not?
8. How did the people feel when their new temple was finished?

They responded with joy!

9. What do their sacrifices indicate about their attitude (6:17)?

They truly felt sorry for their sins and learned their historical lesson (look at application question 4).

#### **QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION**

1. When there is a contentious matter, what is the importance of truth and objectivity?
2. What is the importance of having rulers who will listen to truth?
3. How can you serve as an encourager to others as Haggai and Zechariah did?
4. The people rededicated themselves to the Law of Moses at 6:18. This shows that they learned the historical lesson, that if they abandon God they will go into exile, but if they turn back to God, he will heal their land.
  - a. Are there ways you need to rededicate yourself to God?
  - b. Are there commandments from God that you are not paying attention to?
5. What do we learn about God's character in this passage?

## **“Return of the Law”**

## **Week 5**

Ezra 7:1-10, 25-28

May 6, 2018

**Icebreaker question.** Let each person answer this question as we get to know each other: “Describe your closet.”

**Prayer (now or end of study).** Spend some time praising God. Praise him for any ways he has blessed you recently. Thank him for his forgiveness, his love, mercy, justice, creativity, omnipotence, goodness, provision, peace, holiness, sovereignty (control of all things), wisdom, faithfulness, grace, and anything else.

**Studying the word.** *Ask God to guide your study of His Word.*

### **OBSERVATION & INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS**

1. What significant name do you see in Ezra's lineage?

He is the descendant of Aaron the chief priest. That makes Ezra a priest.

2. What was Ezra's occupation (verse 6)?

In addition to being a priest, in verse 6 we find that he is also a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses.

3. What do we know about Ezra's heart and motivation? (verse 10)

4. How was Ezra uniquely qualified to teach God's commandments?

Ezra had everything he needed. He had natural talent, the priestly pedigree, the favor of the king, and a deep burning passion to do it.

5. What power is given to Ezra in verses 25 and 26?

6. What is Ezra's response to Artaxerxes' decree? (verses 27-28)

7. Why was the teaching of God's commandments an essential part of the restoration of God's people and the temple?

The lack of teaching of God's commandments is one of the main reasons that the people ended up in exile. Now, through Ezra's reforms, everyone would know the commands of Moses.

### **QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION**

1. Why is it important for God's people to know the Scriptures?
2. Ezra spread the work of teaching around to many people. Why is it important that the work of teaching the Scriptures is spread around among many?
3. Ezra had the combination of gifting, talent, and opportunity to serve God in a powerful way. What are some of the ways that God has gifted you and given you opportunity to serve him?
4. Do you think it right to punish those who do not follow the law of God (verse 26)? How do we reconcile that teaching with modern day democracy? How do we reconcile that teaching with Jesus' example?

It is important to remember that ancient Israel was its own kingdom, and that there was no separation of church and state. The church provided the laws and ethical instructions, and the state enforced them.

We live in a different world today, and in many ways it is for the better. Jesus taught in a situation where his followers held no political power at all. Jesus never taught that the state should enforce his teachings. So under the New Covenant, in the age of the church, we do not see this practice to be necessary.

Even so, it is true that those who break God's law deserve punishment, so we do not find the teaching here to be false. Jesus taught that such judgment would take place at the end of time.



## **“Return Preparations”**

## **Lesson 6**

Ezra 8:21-36

May 13, 2018

**Icebreaker question.** Let each person answer this question as we get to know each other: “What is your favorite activity to do on vacation?”

**Prayer (now or end of study).** Pray for the persecuted church worldwide. Lift up those meeting in homes or caves, who would lose jobs, homes, or family if their faith was discovered. Pray for wisdom and protection as they seek to witness Jesus to those around them. Pray for their continued faithfulness.

**Studying the word.** *Ask God to guide your study of His Word.*

### **OBSERVATION & INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS**

*Context: The first part of Ezra chapter 8 records how Ezra gathered all of the Jewish people he could from Babylonia to travel with him back to Jerusalem. Special attention was paid to make sure they had some Levites to serve at the temple.*

1. Have someone read Ezra 8:21-36 aloud.
2. Why did Ezra and his men fast and pray for their journey?
3. How do you see Ezra's commitment to keep God's word in this passage?

The sacrifices are done in accordance with Moses' teachings. The use of Levites' for temple service is also in accordance with Moses' teachings. Even the statement that “God's wrath is against those who oppose him” seems to be a re-worded Genesis 12:1-3, and a summary of God's hand against the Egyptians during the plagues.

4. Why didn't they ask for a military escort?
5. What valuable possessions would make them a target for the enemy? (verses 24-30)

6. Why did they make it safely, according to verse 31?
7. What do you notice about the numbers in this passage? What is their symbolic meaning?

12 Levites – one for each tribe of Israel.

12 bulls for the sacrifice – symbolizing all of Israel.

96 rams – this would be 6 per tribe.

77 Lambs – The number 7 symbolized significance or intensity. So there was a seven-fold curse on Cain, praise to God 7 times per day (Psalm 119:164), 7 deadly sins... therefore 77 lambs of sacrifice was an extra intense and focused way of atoning for sin.

8. In the absence of other details worth noting in this passage, why do you think this book of the Bible spends so much time talking about silver, gold, and wealth?
9. Anything else you notice about this passage that stands out to you?

### **QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION**

1. There is a close connection in this passage between fellowship with God and receiving his protection. They fast, pray, and sacrifice, and the Lord rewards them.
  - a. How should a Christian employ this sort of real-world protection?

The passage gives us a good guide. Fasting, prayer, and commitment to his word.

- b. How does the Gospel teach us about receiving God's favor?

Protestant theology teaches that, "Through faith we receive the merits of Christ's righteousness." This is known as justification. In one sense, through Christ, the Good News is that all things work

together for our good, and nothing removes us from his protection.

In another sense, when we disobey, God's chastening rod of discipline falls upon his children. I believe it is true then, that when you are fasting, praying, and seeking God, you see more of his protection and favor. You experience it more frequently, your eyes are open to see his normal mercies which are always present, and you are more inclined to bold action which creates extra opportunity to see him work.

2. Would it have been wrong for Ezra to take a military escort? Why or why not?
3. Along those lines, Nehemiah stationed guards around the city 7:3. How do we know if we should take similar measures today?
4. What do you learn about God in this passage?
5. What do you learn about man?
6. What do you learn about the life that God desires for man?

**“Return in Confession”****Lesson 7**

Ezra 9

May 20, 2018

**Icebreaker question.** Let each person answer this question as we get to know each other: “What are the best perks that you have ever had at a job?”

**Prayer (now or end of study).** Spend some time praying for each other's needs. Break up into groups of two or three and share with each other, and pray.

**Studying the word.** *Ask God to guide your study of His Word.*

**OBSERVATION & INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS**

1. What was the problem that the official alerted Ezra to? (verses 1-5)
2. How would you describe Ezra's emotion as he prayed to God?
3. Read Deuteronomy 7:3-4. Why did God give the command not to intermarry with foreigners...?
  - a. Was it about race? Why or why not?

Race was downstream from the main issue, which was the purity of their devotion to God. God did not want them to be led away.

- b. What was the most important reason for Moses' original instruction?
- c. Boaz married Ruth, a Moabitess. Did God smile on that? Why or why not?

Boaz serves as the perfect example of how taking a foreign woman was perfectly OK – if the foreign woman had already embraced God. Ruth had famously said to Naomi, “Your God will be my God.” And so there was no risk to Boaz of compromising his faith by taking her.

4. In your own words, summarize how Ezra responded in verses 5-15.
5. What resulted from previous sins such as intermarriage with foreign women, according to Ezra 9:7?

**Their past captivity and exile.**

6. What would result if they did not repent, according to Ezra 9:14?

**They would be utterly annihilated, that there be no remnant.**

7. What do you notice about Ezra's confession in this passage? How should this serve as instruction for us?

**Ezra acknowledges the sin. He acknowledges the consequences of sin. He even considers the future effects of sin if it goes undealt with. Then he fervently asks the Lord for forgiveness and turns from his sin wholeheartedly. He even leads as many as he can away from the sin. This is not just confession, this is spiritual leadership in the face of sin.**

### **QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION**

1. How do these marriage principles apply to a Christian today?
  - a. What should a Christian do if he is considering marriage to a non-Christian?
  - b. What should a Christian do if he is married to a non-Christian? In order to answer this, please look at 1 Corinthians 7:12-16.
2. What Hollywood, Disney, or other pop-culture narratives about love and marriage does this passage challenge?
3. Do you react like Ezra when you realize you have sinned? Why or why not?
4. How is God speaking to you through this passage?

**“Return and Repentance”****Lesson 8**

Ezra 10

May 27, 2018

**Icebreaker question.** Let each person answer this question as we get to know each other: “What is the hardest thing you have ever done?”

**Prayer (now or end of study).** As we break for the summer, spend some time praying for each other to be equipped with the Lord's power. Open your Bibles to Ephesians 6:14-18 and pray God would give you the belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness, shoes of Gospel of peace, shield of faith, helmet of salvation, and sword of the Spirit.

**Studying the word.** *Ask God to guide your study of His Word.*

**OBSERVATION & INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS**

*Here are a couple special notes on this particularly difficult passage.*

*The word for “marriage” in verse 2 is not the normal word for marriage, and may indicate that these were not proper marriages.*

*Malachi, who prophesied at the same time accuses the people of putting away their Jewish wives for forbidden foreign wives. It may be that this passage is in response to that. See Malachi 2:11, 14.*

1. What stands out to you in this passage?
2. How does Ezra's behavior and prayer affect the Israelites?

**A great number of them voluntarily, spontaneously gather at the temple and begin to mourn and weep. This grows into an organized assembly in verse 9 where all the people of Jerusalem came to the temple as they resolved the matter.**

3. Describe Ezra's condition as he is leading the people to repentance? What does he feel? What does he do?

Ezra is deeply grieved. He fasts, prays, cries, and leads the people to obey God.

4. By what means is the covenant made? Who must abide the proclamation?

The covenant is made by oath.

5. Read Deuteronomy 7:3-4. What is God's heart towards his people not intermarrying?

God was not concerned with race. He was concerned with their faith, and that their relationship with Him would not be compromised.

6. Imagine the feeling of the foreign women and children in all this.
7. The people say in verse 14 that the fierce wrath of God is upon them. Does this refer to the rain? Something else? What do you think this means?

The rain is a fascinating detail. I am not sure what it means. I do not know how they were experiencing the "fierce wrath of God." It could simply be that God had punished them in the past for their sin, and they did not want his fierce wrath to come upon them again.

8. How long did it take the people to sort out who had married inappropriately? What does this indicate about the care that was given to the matter? Does it indicate anything about care for the foreigners or children? Why or why not?

**QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION**

1. How do these marriage principles apply to a Christian today?
2. Why does God care so much about who we marry?
3. How does our church deal with corporate breaches of conduct (breaches of conduct that affect the whole body)?
4. How can unchecked sin within a few people in a community affect the whole?
5. Anything else you learn in this passage?