



LifeLight

"In Him was life, and the life was the light of men." John 1:4

Ezra/Nehemiah

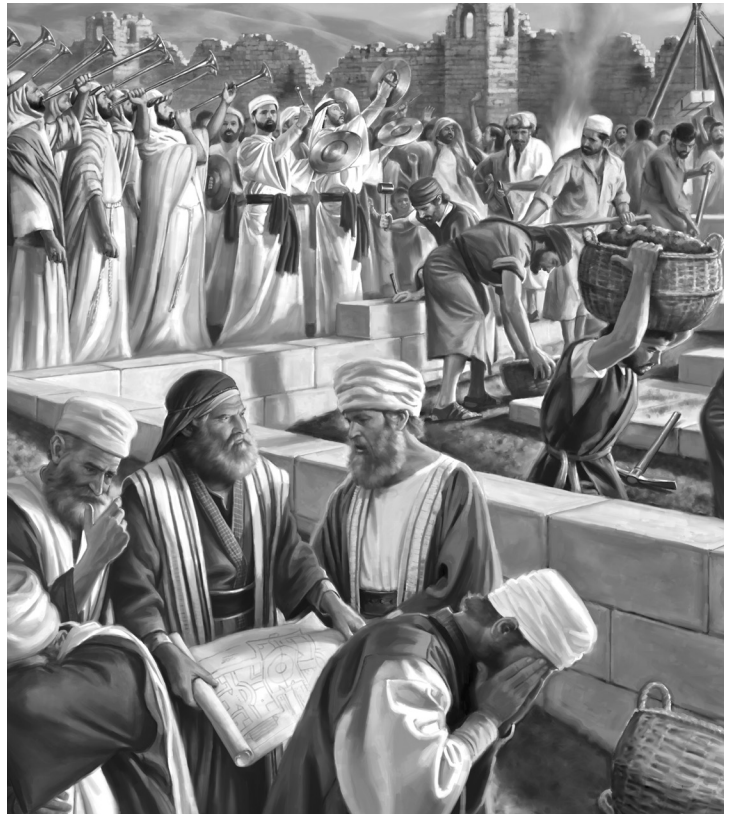
LEADERS GUIDE

From lecture two:

Joy and sorrow mixed together in one bittersweet moment—the laying of the temple foundation. You could imagine all that was taking place in this critical second year. Here we are, yet another milestone had been accomplished in the restoration of God’s holy people in the land of their inheritance, so jubilation was certainly called for. The psalms of David are revived with an exuberance that none of these former exiles had ever seen before. The instruments are employed in the full service of praise to the Lord.

A New Temple

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Introduction

Welcome to LifeLight

A special pleasure is in store for you. You will be instrumental in leading your brothers and sisters in Christ closer to Him who is our life and light (John 1:4). You will have the pleasure of seeing fellow Christians discover new insights and rediscover old ones as they open the Scriptures and dig deep into them, perhaps deeper than they have ever dug before. More than that, you will have the pleasure of sharing in this wonderful study.

LifeLight—An In-depth Study

LifeLight is a series of in-depth Bible studies. The goal of LifeLight is that through a regular program of in-depth personal and group study of Scripture, more and more Christian adults may grow in their personal faith in Jesus Christ, enjoy fellowship with the members of His body, and reach out in love to others in witness and service.

In-depth means that this Bible study includes the following four components: individual daily home study; discussion in a small group; a lecture presentation on the Scripture portion under study; and an enhancement of the week's material (through reading the enrichment magazine).

LifeLight Participants

LifeLight participants are adults who desire a deeper study of the Scriptures than is available in the typical Sunday morning adult Bible class. (Mid-to-older teens might also be LifeLight participants.) While LifeLight does not assume an existing knowledge of the Bible or special experience or skills in Bible study, it does assume a level of commitment that will bring participants to each of the nine weekly assemblies having read the assigned readings and attempted to answer the study questions. Daily reading and study will require from 15 to 30 minutes for the five days preceding the LifeLight assembly. The day following the assembly will be spent reviewing the previous week's study by going over the completed study leaflet and the enrichment magazine.

LifeLight Leadership

While the in-depth process used by LifeLight begins with individual study and cannot achieve its aims without this individual effort, it cannot be completed by individual study alone. Therefore, trained leaders are necessary. You fill one or perhaps more of the important roles described below.

The Director

This person oversees the LifeLight program in a local center (which may be a congregation or a center operated by several neighboring congregations). The director

- serves as the parish LifeLight overall coordinator and leader;
- coordinates the scheduling of the LifeLight program;
- orders materials;
- convenes LifeLight leadership-team meetings;
- develops publicity materials;
- recruits participants;
- maintains records and budgeting;
- assigns, with the leadership-team, participants to small discussion groups;
- makes arrangements for facilities;
- communicates outreach opportunities to small-group leaders and to congregational boards;
- follows up on participants who leave the program.

The Assistant Director (*optional*)

This person may assist the director. Duties listed for the director may be assigned to the assistant director as mutually agreeable.

The Lecture Leader

This person prepares and delivers the lecture at the weekly assembly. (**Lesson material for the lecture leader begins on p. 8.**) The lecture leader

- prepares and presents the Bible study lecture to the large group;

- prepares worship activities (devotional thought, hymn, prayer), using resources in the study leaflet and leaders guide and possibly other, outside sources;
- helps the small-group discussion leaders to grow in understanding the content of the lessons;
- encourages prayer at weekly leadership-team and discussion leaders meetings.

The Small-Group Coordinator *(optional; the director may fill this role)*

This person supervises and coordinates the work of the small-group discussion leaders. The small-group coordinator

- recruits with the leadership-team the small-group discussion leaders;
- trains or arranges for training of the discussion leaders;
- assists the director and discussion leaders in follow-up and outreach;
- encourages the discussion leaders to contact absent group members;
- participates in the weekly leadership-team and discussion-leaders equipping meetings;
- provides ongoing training and support as needed.

The Small-Group Discussion Leaders

These people guide and facilitate discussion of LifeLight participants in the small groups. (**Lesson material for the small-group leaders begins on p. 53.**) There should be one discussion leader for every group of no more than twelve participants. The small-group discussion leaders are, perhaps, those individuals who are most important to the success of the program. They should, therefore, be chosen with special care and be equipped with skills needed to guide discussion and to foster a caring fellowship within the group. These discussion leaders

- prepare each week for the small-group discussion by using the study leaflet and small-group leaders guide section for that session (**see p. 53**);
- read the enrichment magazine as a study supplement;
- guide and facilitate discussion in their small group;
- encourage and assist the discussion group in prayer;

- foster fellowship and mutual care within the discussion group;
- attend weekly discussion leaders training meetings.

Leadership Training

LifeLight leaders will meet weekly to review the previous week's work and plan the coming week. At this session, leaders can address concerns and prepare for the coming session. LifeLight is a 1½-hour program with no possibility for it to be taught in the one hour typically available on Sunday mornings. Some congregations, however, may want to use the Sunday morning Bible study hour for LifeLight preparation and leadership training. In such a meeting, the lecture leader and/or small-group coordinator may lead the discussion leaders through the coming week's lesson, reserving 5 or 10 minutes for problem solving or other group concerns.

While it requires intense effort, LifeLight has proven to bring great benefit to LifeLight participants. The effort put into this program, both by leaders and by participants, will be rewarding and profitable.

The LifeLight Weekly Schedule

Here is how LifeLight will work week by week:

1. Before session 1, each participant will receive the study leaflet for session 1 and the enrichment magazine for the course. The study leaflet contains worship resources (for use both in individual daily study and at the opening of the following week's assembly) and readings and study questions for five days. Challenge questions will lead those participants who have the time and desire a greater challenge into even deeper levels of study.
2. After the five days of individual study at home, participants will gather for a weekly assembly of all LifeLight participants. The assembly will begin with a brief period of worship (5 minutes). Participants will then join their assigned small discussion groups (of twelve or fewer, who will remain the same throughout the course), where they will go over the week's study questions together (55 minutes). Assembling together once again, participants will listen to a lecture presentation on the readings they have studied in the previous week and discussed in their small groups (20 minutes). After the lecture presentation, the director or another leader will distribute the study leaflet for the following week.

Closing announcements and other necessary business may take another five minutes before dismissal.

In some places some small groups will not join the weekly assembly because of scheduling or other reasons. Such groups may meet at another time and place (perhaps in the home of one of the small group's members). Those congregations may record the lecture given by the lecture leader at the weekly assembly and duplicate it for use by other groups meeting later in the week.

3. On the day following the assembly, participants will review the preceding week's work by rereading the study leaflet they completed (and that they perhaps supplemented or corrected during the discussion in their small group) and by reading appropriate articles in the enrichment magazine.

Then the LifeLight weekly study process will begin all over again!

Recommended Study Resources and Worship

The Lutheran Study Bible. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009. This resource contains more than 26,000 study and application notes, a most thorough reference guide (pp. lxx–cx), and over 90,000 cross-references, as well as a 31,000-entry concordance, maps, charts, and timelines.

Roehrs, Walter R., and Martin H. Franzmann. *Concordia Self-Study Commentary*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979. This one-volume commentary on the Bible contains 950 pages and is tailored for lay use.

The Concordia Organist is a 31-CD collection of pipe organ accompaniments for all the hymns and liturgical music in *Lutheran Service Book*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House (order no. 99–2264). Use these CDs for worship hymn accompaniment.

Steinmann, Andrew E. *Concordia Commentary Series: Ezra and Nehemiah*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010. This in-depth commentary ties together what God accomplished through His people's faithful labors under Ezra and Nehemiah with the accomplishments of Jesus Christ for our salvation.

Returning from Exile

Deuteronomy 29–30; 2 Chronicles 36; Ezekiel 36; Jeremiah 25:1–14;
Daniel 1; 5; Esther 2; 4; Isaiah 45

Preparing for the Session

Central Focus

A review of the Babylonian exile and the Israelites' subsequent return provides a helpful context for the study of Ezra and Nehemiah. A lot of history has gone by for God's people up to this point, and this key event will extend its influence for centuries afterward. Greater familiarity with the exile helps form the proper backdrop to introduce the main characters who are about to arrive on stage.

Objectives

That participants, led by the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, will

1. place Ezra and Nehemiah within their appropriate historical context;
2. gain an understanding of how the exile influenced the roles of these two figures; and
3. prepare to navigate the unique style of these two books.

Note for the small-group leaders: Lesson notes and other materials you will need begin on page 53.

For the Lecture Leader

Session Plan

Worship

Begin the session with the hymn printed in the study leaflet. Accompaniments are available in denominational hymnals, such as *Lutheran Service Book* or *Lutheran Worship* (refer to hymnal index). (Note: Concordia Publishing House has available *The Concordia Organist*. All the initial worship hymns in the LifeLight courses are included in this resource. It's especially helpful for mission congregations and small parishes. See the list of study resources on page 7.) Follow with this prayer:

Prayer

Merciful, heavenly Father, when You brought the remnant of Your chosen people back from their exile, it was more than just giving them a second chance. You were keeping Your promise of salvation through Jesus Christ and preparing the hearts of those who would receive Him in faith. Grant us now, as we see Your gracious hand in the events of our lives, that we may be strengthened in our faithfulness, and draw us ever closer to the heavenly city that You have prepared for all Your ransomed people, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Lecture Presentation

1 Punishment and Promise (Deuteronomy 29–30; 2 Chronicles 36:1–16; Ezekiel 36:16–38)

You can't say they weren't warned! God had threatened the people of Israel with exile since the days of Moses, when the massive nation was wrapping up its forty years of wandering in the wilderness. On the plains of Moab, right on the Holy Land's threshold, the warning was made crystal clear: (Deuteronomy 28:63–64) "You shall be plucked off the land that you are entering to take possession of it. And the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other."

What would motivate a loving God to ruin His chosen people in such a decisive way? It would be nothing else but their infidelity to Him. After all, the Lord had said in the Ten Commandments that He was a jealous God. "You shall have no other gods before Me," or literally, "before My face," can actually be restated, "Get your puny self-made gods out of My face!" The almighty Creator of heaven and earth does not share the stage with anyone. Israel should have known that, especially since those ten plagues that their fathers had witnessed in Egypt were more than just a way to convince Pharaoh to let them go; they also constituted the Lord's judgment against the pantheon of Egyptian gods (see Exodus 12:12).

But even though God was constantly proving that the false gods were nothing, the Israelites continued to desert their Lord and worship them instead of Him. The approximately eight hundred years of history from Joshua to David to Zedekiah, the last reigning king of Judah, was a recurring cycle of apostasy, punishment, repentance, restoration, and then back to apostasy. It didn't matter if God's people were led by a judge or a king, the pattern was the same. They rejected the Lord, and they had to suffer the consequences.

And yet, the Lord had a promise for His chosen people, the ones called by His name. The time of exile would not be permanent. Though most fell away from the one true God, there were still a few left who would bow the knee to no other. Even though a small percentage were eventually to return to the Holy Land—a mere remnant in comparison to the previous magnificence of the kingdom—God would not forget the oath that He swore to Abraham, David, and all the other faithful ones who died with confident hope in the coming Savior, the Messiah, Jesus. They still had hundreds of years to wait until Christ's advent, but the believers put their trust and hope in God's Word, which laid before them His impressive track record over the previous centuries.

Just as Moses held nothing back as he announced the Lord's strict warnings against rejecting Him, so also the man of God delivered the Gospel in its full sweetness in Deuteronomy: (30:9–10) "For the LORD will again take delight in prospering you, as He took delight in your fathers, when you obey the voice of the LORD your God, to keep His commandments and His statutes that are written in this Book of the Law, when you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul." This is not saying, "Do everything perfectly, and then God will reward you." Rather, Moses is saying, "Believe the Lord, and take Him at His Word. Turn away from what is false, trust in His forgiveness, and listen to the rich promises that He has in store for you. He will not fail to bring them about for your sake."

If His Word is rejected, then His blessing is impeded; but when one believes the Lord, then all will be provided. Jesus said the same thing this way: (Matthew 6:33) "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." Seeking God's kingdom and righteousness is not only obeying the Ten Commandments but also trusting that the perfect righteousness of Christ belongs to repentant sinners through faith in Him. It may take a grueling ordeal such

as the exile to get the message through, but the lesson learned makes the difference between eternal life and death.

2 Completed Sabbaths (2 Chronicles 36:17–21; Jeremiah 25:1–14; Ezekiel 36:1–15)

The Sabbath was not just a weekly occurrence. Of course, the Sabbath Day was a key liturgical element in the Old Testament worship calendar. But there were also sabbatical years for the land—six years of planting and harvesting and one year off. Pentecost was the festival day of rest set aside after a "week of weeks," or seven weeks, had elapsed after the first barley harvest in the spring. And the granddaddy of all Sabbaths was the Year of Jubilee, in which both people and land that had been sold to another party were transferred back, and the land enjoyed yet another year-long rest.

Observing the Sabbath, whether the whole seventh year or merely the seventh day of each week, was an act of faith on behalf of the Hebrew people. When they lapsed in their faith, they doubted that the Lord would provide for them during the time when their own efforts were to be held back. Unbelief always has a way of making you revert to a philosophy of works-righteousness. Concern for the Sabbath involved more than simply taking a break to relieve stress. True rest came to those who believed that God provides for all needs of body and soul.

When abandonment of the Lord's Sabbaths continued unabated for generation upon generation, then the cumulative effect of faith's neglect brought His people great harm. Our Lord wanted to impress this upon them by arranging for a "catch-up" time of rest for the land. In addition to corporate repentance, this extended time of rest was another key role that the Babylonian exile would serve. Once the land achieved its required Sabbaths, then the people would be allowed back to cultivate it and resume producing its yield under the gracious blessing of God. The author of Chronicles introduced a round figure, seventy years, as a new symbolic number, whereas the clear favorite in other places of the Bible is forty (e.g., forty years of wandering, forty days and forty nights of flooding, forty days that Jesus was in the wilderness). Here, however, we have the combination of seven, a number of perfection, with ten, a number of fullness or completeness. Some people were gone longer than others; some stayed in Babylon or in other scattered nations. Some were humiliated and left as prisoners, taunted by their captors (see Psalm 137:3); others fared much better in the land of their captivity,

as we shall soon see.

One thing was for sure: the land was the Lord's. Israel was meant to use it as His stewards. When the harvest came in, the people would not eat anything that was brought in from the fields until a portion was offered up to the Lord in sacrifice first. This gives us the meaning of the term *firstfruits giving*. In a way, the firstfruits offering effectively released the rest of the harvest to the people so that it could then be used for their daily needs. You gave first to the Lord because your faith recognized that everything belongs to Him. Then He would provide for your every need from what was left. Our human nature so often wants to do it the other way around: give to God what we happen to have lying around only after we have met our needs.

Returning exiles recalled prophecies like those of Jeremiah, prophecies that called for the completion of the land's Sabbaths. They knew it wasn't just some obscure hoop that they needed to jump through. Instead, it was imperative that they recall the faith of their fathers and remember the mighty works of the Lord for their sake. They were looking for the greater promise of rest that is ours in Christ, a final rest that enjoys His abundant salvation, paid for by His precious blood.

3 From Babylon to Persia (Daniel 5)

Watch out when there is a change in management! Long before the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, the famous dream-interpreter Joseph convinced his father and brothers to settle in Egypt in order to wait out the widespread famine that the Lord had foreshown in Pharaoh's dream. The family was finally back together again, and before long they were building themselves into a nation. Then the historian records these fateful words: (Exodus 1:8) "Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." Because Joseph practically saved the nation from extinction, memory of him meant that his extended family would be treated as friends and allies to the Egyptians. But with the change in ruler, the very least you could say was that fortunes changed for the children of Israel, and it was definitely not for the better. It eventually got so bad that the people cried out to God for rescue, and He responded with the mighty acts performed through Moses.

Fast-forward several centuries, and we see that Daniel got to witness a change in a ruler during the time that he served in the courts of the king of Babylon. This was quite the dramatic event, complete with the origi-

nal, iconic "writing on the wall," an expression that to this very day means that final doom is right around the corner. The rule of Nebuchadnezzar had been passed on to Belshazzar, who may have been his actual son or merely a successor who was called a "son"; that part is not as clear. What is clear is that on the last night of his reign and of his life, Belshazzar witnessed a divine hand appear and etch an Aramaic sentence into the plaster. None of the thousand guests at the feast could even read it, much less interpret its meaning, but the queen knew the man who would know. So upon a recommendation that is vaguely reminiscent of Joseph's, Daniel was promised a reward and a promotion in the kingdom if he would simply explain the writing on the wall. Even though it was discovered to reveal Belshazzar's immediate death and the overthrow of the entire kingdom, the king at least made good on his promise and gave Daniel what many others in the room no doubt had wanted for themselves.

Enter the Persians on the scene. Babylon would now be ruled by sixty-two-year-old Darius the Mede—not to be confused with the later Persian king Darius who shows up in the Book of Ezra or with yet another Darius who is mentioned in Nehemiah. This Darius has his own lesson to learn about the power of the one true God, which will be made clear to him in the well-known story of Daniel and the lions' den. For the rest of the exiles, this change in regime is an event that the Lord will use for the good of His people, to fulfill the promise that He would bring some of them back to the Holy Land.

Persia conquered Babylon in a way that was markedly different from the way that Babylon had conquered Judah. Officials who had survived the battles and coups (such as Daniel) were usually kept in their positions of power. The Persian god Ahuramazda (ah-WHO-rah-maz-da) was the deity of choice; however, other gods were respected, and the Persians did not disturb the religious expression of the lands they conquered. (There is an excellent historical synopsis provided by Andrew E. Steinmann in *Concordia Commentary: Ezra and Nehemiah*, pp. 21–29.)

4 Positions of Privilege (Daniel 1; Esther 2; 4)

It would be interesting to know what Daniel did in the land of Judah before he and his friends and family were carried off to Babylon in exile. Perhaps he was still too young and didn't reveal his God-given talents until he entered the service of King Nebuchadnezzar. It is

known that he and his famous three friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were youths from the Judean nobility. They had shown great promise in the eyes of the Babylonians already, so they were accepted into their captors' elite, three-year education and training program.

Over a century later, when some of the exiles had already returned home, many others had made their homes permanently in Persia, as had Esther and her family. She did not live in Babylon, but farther east in the capital city of Susa. She was an orphan, and her guardian-cousin Mordecai was from the little tribe of Benjamin, which made him a kinsman to King Saul of old, as well as to the apostle Paul, who was to appear centuries later. Besides that, there is very little said in Scripture to indicate whether Esther had familial connections to nobility. But what she had was her stunning beauty and elegant, even regal, charm.

When the story of Esther was taught in Sunday schools of the recent past, the best one could use as an illustration was a beauty contest. That may still provide some recognition, but these days, you could say instead that Esther got picked for King Ahasuerus (Ah-HAZ-shoo-eh-rous; *aka* Xerxes, related to the Mediterranean name Sergio) and his narcissistic reality show that you could call "The Bachelor King!" It wasn't as though Mr. Most-Eligible was lonely—he had a huge harem of one-night women, but only one was going to be selected as the next queen of Persia. (There's another title idea!)

Once Esther made it through to the semifinal round of seven women, she would receive elite training. Daniel was likewise chosen to receive special training, but unlike Daniel's experience, Esther's would center around everything cosmetology (yet another reality show twist!). The pressure was mounting; Mordecai was constantly seeking updates. Esther completed all of her preparation and finally took her turn with King "Sergio." And everyone's favorite candidate ended up being the one not holding a flower but wearing the crown! She would be placed in the perfect position to avert certain genocide for her people. Though God's name is curiously never mentioned in the Book of Esther, the book's namesake nevertheless became an instrument for His work to be done.

And so, as with what had happened long ago in Egypt—when Joseph finally lifted up his head and left the prison where he had languished half his life and entered into the service of the Pharaoh—God prepared His people to enter influential positions wherever they found themselves. They would be led to call upon their opportunities for influence, and they would summon no small amount of courage along the way. The Lord had His ultimate salvation plan in mind, and He would reveal His purposes to His chosen, faithful servants at just the right time. Ezra and Nehemiah would likewise be divinely placed in positions of key influence, and so they would find themselves in noteworthy company. As our study progresses, take note of this development, because it will play itself out in different ways for each man. God provides a wide variety of talents and vocations for His people, and each one is exceedingly useful for His purposes, even if your particular story doesn't end up as a popular television-show script!

5 King Cyrus (Isaiah 45; 2 Chronicles 36:22–23)

The Assyrians had made mincemeat out of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Over a century later, Nebuchadnezzar carried the best and brightest of Judah home to Babylon, as though they were pet goldfish that a child brings home from the county fair. You would not blame the exiles if they were a little nervous when Persia conquered Babylon and a new king arrived on the scene, Cyrus. Persia's more permissive policy toward conquered nations was largely due to this man, who was a kinder, gentler sort of world dominator!

It wasn't as though Cyrus was incapable of ruthlessness. When he came to power, Persia was merely a vassal kingdom of Media, and firmly under the thumb of Cyrus's grandfather Astyages. Nevertheless, Cyrus deposed him and defeated the kingdoms of Lydia and Babylon in order to establish the Persian Empire, which stretched from India to Arabia. By the reign of his son Cambyses, the territory extended temporarily as far as Egypt. In a volatile region like Judea, it made practical sense to have a good tenant established there to help keep the peace for Persia. Cyrus thought he was helping his own cause by arranging for the Judahites to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple there. The Lord, however, had already set him aside to do this for His greater purpose—fulfilling His centuries-old promise to restore His displaced people to the land of their inheritance. It was still the very same land that God long ago promised

to Abraham and his seed forever. It would become the land on which our Lord and Savior, Jesus, the promised Messiah, would walk. Cyrus simply had to play his part in the story.

The people of Judah who were familiar with the preaching of Isaiah would have heard about how Cyrus would fit into God's plan. Several generations before the exile, this Southern Kingdom prophet was inspired to call upon Cyrus by name as the one handpicked by God Himself to shepherd His people back to their own land. Surprisingly, Isaiah even used Messiah-style language when he prophesied about Cyrus. Though this ambitious military man and emperor did not know or acknowledge the Lord, he still had the almighty King of all Creation holding on to his right hand. All of Cyrus's successes and victories were gifts from God—talents on loan, if you will, to conduct His business until the time when the true King would arrive in human flesh! Cyrus would not need to lead the former captives out with mighty plagues and thunderous works, as the Lord had performed through Moses many centuries earlier. He would simply proclaim it, and it would be done. No need for an angel of death or parted Red Sea this time!

Conclusion

The Babylonian exile is an important event in the history of God's people in the Old Testament. It underlies their entire experience during the half-millennium leading up to the coming of Christ. On the other side of this ordeal, only a remnant of the faithful will emerge back in the land of their inheritance to resume the temple worship in Jerusalem and dwell within its rebuilt walls. Ezra and Nehemiah are key figures in this return effort, and, just as with Esther, Daniel, Joseph, and others, their own positions of privilege and influence will be put to use for the Lord's purposes. As we now consider the two books that bear their names, we will see that while God accomplishes His master plan of salvation through them, they will also have to face specific challenges to their faith and vocation.

Concluding Activities

Speak a closing prayer, make any necessary announcements, and distribute study leaflet 2.

Return and Rebuild

Ezra 1–3; Leviticus 23:33–43

Preparing for the Session

Central Focus

Ezra the scribe picks up the Old Testament narrative where Chronicles left off, and he continues writing the history of Israel from the time of the proclamation of the Persian King Cyrus. The exile had finally reached an end, and the first wave of captives were now making their pilgrimage to the Promised Land, having been stirred up with the intent to rebuild God's house in Jerusalem.

Objectives

That participants, led by the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, will

1. perceive the role of the unbelieving King Cyrus at the center of almighty God's plan;
2. begin learning to read the extensive records that are included in Ezra and Nehemiah; and
3. appreciate the significance of reinstating the temple worship practices.

Note for the small-group leaders: Lesson notes and other materials you will need begin on page 58.

For the Lecture Leader

Session Plan

Worship

Begin the session with the hymn printed in the study leaflet. Accompaniments are available in denominational hymnals, such as *Lutheran Service Book* or *Lutheran Worship* (refer to hymnal index). (Note: Concordia Publishing House has available *The Concordia Organist*. All the initial worship hymns in the LifeLight courses are included in this resource. It's especially helpful for mission congregations and small parishes. See the list of study resources on page 7.) Follow with this prayer:

Prayer

O Lord, our God, as the foundation was being laid for Jerusalem's second temple, the people's cheering was mingled with tears of sorrow over the loss of the magnificent first temple. When we come to those moments in our lives in which a wonderful blessing is mixed with pain, provide us with Your peace and strength, as only You can give, so that by the Holy Spirit we can gain the proper perspective as we travel our life's journey, and also look forward with joyful anticipation toward the full revelation of the precious salvation that, although hidden now, is already ours in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

Lecture Presentation

1 Cyrus's Proclamation (Ezra 1:1–4)

One of the notable features of the Book of Ezra is that it quotes, even reprints, if you will, official public documents from the Persian Empire. Leading off its chronicle of the Judean exiles and their return to the Holy Land, the book includes perhaps its most dramatic example of a source document. The decree of King Cyrus, as recorded in these four verses and carried out through Ezra and Nehemiah, revived for the people the story of salvation as it would be fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Why is it dramatic? Well, you have Cyrus coming to power, and this is his first year of control over Babylon. Then you have Jeremiah's divinely inspired and eagerly anticipated prophecy coming true, not to mention the Isaiah passage that we already studied, in which Cyrus's own name is invoked. In an unprecedented twist, the narrative reveals the ruler's shocking claim that "the LORD, the God of heaven . . . has charged me to build Him a house at Jerusalem" (v. 2). Yes, you heard that right! A Gentile, unbelieving sovereign believes that God tapped *him* on the shoulder! You can just imagine the exiles standing there, looking at one another, speechless as they listened to the announcement. They probably had to read the document for themselves before they could believe it. So Ezra records it for posterity, especially since he will oversee a significant portion of that decree's aftermath.

We remember from the story of Daniel and the lions' den (Daniel 6) how seriously the Persians regarded their official documents. Their legal tradition made it unmistakable that established decrees and laws could not be changed. Darius was conned by Daniel's enemies, who exploited his vanity (and perhaps his lack of a political upper hand) to get him to publish one of those permanent decrees that, for thirty days, nobody should make petition to any other god or man except to Darius. Daniel continued to pray as usual, and so he was dragged before the ruler to face the inevitable lawful punishment. You and I know that he made it out alive the next morning, but to everyone at the time, it seemed that Daniel was going to be the next martyr of the Israelite exile. Even if Darius were to beg, plead, and protest, he had no choice but to enforce the law of the Medes and Persians. Powerful as he was, the king could not violate anything that was beyond himself.

Though it is but a mere shadow of it, this strict principle lays claim to an important biblical truth: God's unchangeable Word establishes the power of all rulers and nations, whether they believe in Him or not. His are the decrees that truly cannot be altered. The laws of the Medes and Persians ran the risk of abuse, and they could be twisted for evil gain; but the life-giving words of Law and Gospel cannot lie or change. Anyone who attempts to twist God's Word will ultimately pay the punishment. The Lord alone gives and takes away worldly power and authority, and all that He does in this regard serves one great purpose—the salvation of every believer in Christ.

And even though King Cyrus himself did not believe, he still had to reflect somewhat on his rightful place under a power higher than he. The Lord was the God of heaven, as he said in his announcement, so at the very least he could in his mind equate Israel's God with the principle of the unchangeable laws of the Medes and Persians. Cyrus was aware that he could never change a single detail of the Lord's will, any more than he could have made a law turning himself into a god for thirty days. So, as a conscientious ruler, yet still a pagan, he simply followed the orders that he was given and complied with the Lord's own decree to rebuild His temple in Jerusalem. No doubt it surprised each and every exile in Persia, but the real pronouncement had been on the books even before Cyrus was born. The record of the return to Jerusalem begins in the Book of Ezra with this amazing historical event, but really, it begins with the Lord, who always follows through on His promises.

Ezra couldn't have said it better himself, and he didn't have to! He just let the original decree speak from the written record.

2 Temple Vessels (Ezra 1:5–11)

The Lord may have stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus to publish his decree, but that alone would not have been enough to accomplish His will. God's inspiration was also extended toward His chosen people in the foreign land to which they were exiled. It was going to be a long trip back to Jerusalem, so the Judean remnant was in need of a little divine "push" to get them to respond to the king's invitation.

In this chapter, Ezra uses the Hebrew verbs meaning "rise up" and "go up" in a couple of ways. You could almost imagine the leaders of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin straightening their backs with the newfound confidence that they had received from God's Word of command. You could imagine that before this summon reached their ears, they were bent over their work or reclined to eat their meal just as though this were any other day. Now, these family leaders are standing on their feet in dutiful response to the Lord's will. The priests and Levites also played an important part in this event, because they were the necessary personnel for the temple's worship ceremonies. Since way back in the time of Moses, they were the only ones authorized to carry the ancient holy things. Therefore, in response to the Lord's call, they too stepped up to the task of returning to the Holy City.

In a more literal sense, Ezra writes that the travelers were to "go up" to Jerusalem, taking note that the city was situated in a mountainous stronghold. This put it at a significantly higher elevation than the city of Babylon, which lay in the middle of the Mesopotamian valley. The last part of the pilgrimage to Jerusalem—especially if they came by way of Jericho—would involve a steep ascent and a rigorous climb to the Temple Mount itself. Even today, automobiles (and particularly tour buses!) labor with difficulty up the steep highway. I can only imagine what it would be like to travel it on foot, carrying heavy golden vessels on your shoulders, as the Levites had to do.

As a concluding note to the first chapter, Ezra included an inventory of those precious temple dishes that, in a way, had been called back from an exile of their own. King Nebuchadnezzar had them carted out of Israel and stashed in the house of his false gods. His suc-

cessor, Belshazzar, summoned for them to be used as utensils at his blasphemous banquet, which then led to the appearance of the hand to etch his immediate doom on the wall (Daniel 5). Now, King Cyrus entrusts these Israelite worship essentials to his own treasurer, Mithredath, so that he would count them out piece by piece for the appointed Jewish leader, Sheshbazzar. This move went a long way to ensure that the temple was really going to be rebuilt.

It wasn't going to be just a pretty building—it was meant for the worship of the one true God and to proclaim His forgiveness that would be fully accomplished in Christ Jesus. The holy vessels were not just treasured antiques—they were designed to play their necessary role in the daily and special sacrifices. I'm sure it was a massive relief to Sheshbazzar and the rest of the Jews that, although the temple building had been destroyed and it would be a monumental task ahead of them to rebuild it, still God's people were not going to have to start from square one, both literally and spiritually speaking. This turn of events meant that the Lord had once again graciously provided a means of His grace for them so that they could access forgiveness of the promised Messiah. The prophets who had preached disaster and condemnation had also reached out with a sweet Gospel voice of restoration. Now that prophecy would also come to fulfillment.

3 First Returning Group (Ezra 2)

Okay, how many names were you able to pronounce from Ezra 2? Seriously, you should not feel obligated to stammer out each and every twisting and turning syllable from all the long lists of names that appear in Ezra and Nehemiah. These two biblical books are unique and distinct from the rest of Scripture in that they contain many official records and lists collected together in one place. You thought that this type of passage was difficult to read? Imagine collecting the information and painstakingly writing it down on a scroll! The numerical figures written in numbers in your Bible translation were originally fully spelled out in words in Hebrew! It may be a challenge to get through all of this material bit by bit, but the point is really for the reader to see the big picture of what is going on.

God's people were about to return and reoccupy the land that Moses had given to them and their families long ago as their inheritance. Their ancestors were counted in a census (hence the name of the Book of

Numbers) while they were still in the wilderness, waiting to cross the Jordan under the leadership of Joshua. This exercise was meant to determine where each family would establish its homesteads and cities in the Holy Land. This time around, now that their descendants are returning to Judea, they have been grouped and listed by means of their cities and family names in order to pick up where they left off. Genealogies were valuable tools for the priests because these men needed the documentation to prove that they were descended from Moses' brother Aaron before they could be authorized to serve before the presence of the Lord in His temple.

God never forgot about His people, even in a faraway land of exile; therefore, they should never forget about His prior acts of mercy shown to their forefathers. Jerusalem and the temple would be rebuilt as a first priority, but then these other surrounding towns would follow suit. They could not expect to revive everything so that it would be *exactly* the same as it was before Nebuchadnezzar invaded, but this list of names shows us that there was a sincere effort on the part of a determined few to get things back on the right track. None of this return would have been possible, of course, had it not been for the people's faith in the Lord's promises. Their leaders had to be men of confident trust in God's Word or else they would quickly have lost the confidence of the people making the journey with them. If a mighty man such as Moses would have grumblers and doubters, then the leaders listed in Ezra 2:2 would have to prepare to answer their share of challenges as well. While we're looking at this particular verse, it should be noted that the man named Nehemiah who is listed there among the very first to return from exile would not have been the same as the one talked about in the book of that name. He comes up a few decades later, mentioned as a contemporary of Ezra himself. Also, Mordecai was a common name among the Judeans, so don't think that the Mordecai who returned here in Ezra 2 was Esther's cousin and father-figure, who likely stayed in Persia his whole life.

In order to preempt you from a nagging sense of déjà vu, be aware that you will see this list of returning exiles repeated in Nehemiah 7. The more intense Bible scholars among us will make note of the numerical and stylistic discrepancies that exist between the two records. This could be explained either by the use of a slightly different source document or by an error that may have been made here or there when the scrolls were copied by hand down through the centuries. Entries that were

mistakenly repeated are known as dittography. Errors caused by a scribe looking ahead and missing a portion are called haplography. In a few cases, a name is spelled wrong or a number is reversed, but to this point, based on the archaeological evidence in known existence, it is impossible at times to tell which one is correct, whether the one in Ezra or in Nehemiah.

4 Altar and Feast of Booths (Ezra 3:1–7; Leviticus 23:33–43)

Once the returning exiles arrived in the Holy Land, the land of their inheritance and of the promise that God made to their forefathers, they remembered first things first. Ezra 3 opens up with the reference to the “seventh month,” which for the Israelites is not July but more toward the end of summer and the beginning of fall. The seventh month was the Sabbath month—it was full of significant events. Back in the time of Moses, the seventh month would begin with a special ceremony and the blowing of trumpets. Then, on the tenth day of the month, the high priest would prepare a sacrifice for himself and for all the people. He would enter the Most Holy Place with the blood of the sacrifice and sprinkle it on the holy ark of the covenant. This festival was called the Day of Atonement, or *Yom Kippur*, and it would be the only day of the entire year that a human being would enter the nearest, most holy presence of the almighty God. With the lack of a temple or even a tent that could be called the house of the Lord, the Day of Atonement observance would have to be put on hold at least for this first year after the return.

But then the seventh month continued with another festival, the Feast of Booths. This was the celebration that brought all the pilgrims together to the torn-down city of Jerusalem. They rejoiced that the Lord had finally brought them back home, but you can also sense that they were just getting the idea firsthand about how much work there was ahead of them, and how much animosity was going to be coming their way in an attempt to thwart their success.

The Festival of Booths was the perfect holiday for these people who were at the very beginning of their rebuilding effort. You see, the booths were tents—temporary shelters in which they lived for seven days—and these tents reminded the children of Israel about their forefathers’ wandering in the wilderness for forty years. At that time, tents were their only homes, and they had to rely totally on the generosity of the Lord their God. Even their bread had to be gathered from the desert floor in the form of manna until the time Joshua, Moses’ suc-

cessor, finally brought the wandering nation across the Jordan River. So a festival that requires God’s people to devote a week to “roughing it” in tents as a grateful response to the magnificent gift of Atonement was precisely what would put this new generation of believers in the proper frame of mind as they got going on this new chapter in their collective life (see the phrase, “as one man,” in v. 1).

Given that—day in and day out—the central activity of the temple was burning offerings, the installation of the altar on the first day of the seventh month was a critical first step in the rebuilding process. This wasn’t the people’s altar; not an object of pride or good morale or national identity. This was the altar of the *God* of Israel. The Lord *alone* had called for it to be set up in His chosen place of blessing. Since at this time in the history of salvation, sacrifices were the one and only means of the divine gift of forgiveness, Moses’ ancient written instructions did not equivocate on the requirement to build an altar. Two key individuals were present at its foundation, representing the highest office-holders among the clergy and lay people. Those two were the chief priest Jeshua (whose name is similar to Joshua and Jesus), and the Jewish leader of royal blood, Zerubbabel. More work was ahead for the temple builders, but the altar was where it all began.

5 The Second Temple (Ezra 3:8–13)

Joy and sorrow mixed together in one bittersweet moment—the laying of the temple foundation. You could imagine all that was taking place in this critical second year. Here we are, yet another milestone had been accomplished in the restoration of God’s holy people in the land of their inheritance, so jubilation was certainly called for. The psalms of David are revived with an exuberance that none of these former exiles had ever seen before. The instruments are employed in the full service of praise to the Lord. Levites are pressed into service from twenty years old and up. A joyful shout rings out so that the sound of it could be heard from far away.

So why is there weeping? And not just a quiet tear of fond reminiscence—this is full-on, red-faced bawling going on here! Whatever could be the matter? Can’t these old-timers just be grateful for what God has brought about in the last year? But the ones who remember the former temple weep loudly because at this juncture they realize anew the massive depth of Israel’s earlier apostasy. Solomon’s temple was certainly a beautiful sight to behold, never to be equaled again. They would have to resign

themselves to that bare fact. Those who remembered what things were like before the exile could have also recalled how such a glorious building, which had been dedicated to an abundantly merciful God, could have been so cruelly defiled by pagan monuments and sexual immorality, all in the name of trying to improve upon the religion of the Lord Most High.

The second temple was not to surpass the first, because the sinful human nature was still capable of destroying this noble attempt to get things going again in the right direction. Those who worked on the temple and the rest of the city of Jerusalem were not only going to face enemies in the surrounding area. The people would also have to fight within themselves those very same urges to reject God and His loving promises that had entirely consumed their forefathers prior to the exile. Idol worship was not a passing fad—the temptation would come up again and again. What the humbler look of this new temple would impress upon the ones who would make use of it is that we place our trust not in the grandeur of our works or devotion, but rather solely in the undeserved mercy of God, who will be present even where two or three are gathered in His name, no matter how humble the visible surroundings.

Conclusion

Now that the foundation is laid, the work will begin in earnest. At the same time, the regular worship practices that have been reestablished now carry on in the people's worship life. As they work, so also do they pray. It may be backwards to say something like "God helps those who help themselves"; perhaps it would be closer to the truth to put it as "God helps us by pure grace, so that in using our talents in our particular callings, we are His means to help ourselves and others." It may not be as catchy, but it is more precise.

Concluding Activities

Speak a closing prayer, make any necessary announcements, and distribute study leaflet 3.