

PERSONAL APPLICATION

EZRA

You will be reading from the ten chapters of the Book of Ezra. Pray to the Holy Spirit that He may give you the guidance you need for your study.

Review

1. How would you apply the lesson you learned from the three men in the fiery furnace to your own life?

Ezra 1

For your chronological information:

In 536 BC: Zerubbabel with 42,360 Jews returned to Jerusalem.

In 451 BC: Ezra with 1,754 males returned to build the Temple.

In 444 BC: Nehemiah with an army escort returned to fortify Jerusalem.

2. The Book of Ezra belongs to the historical records of Israel. Read 2 Chronicles 36:22–23 and Ezra 1:1–3. What does this tell you about these books of the Bible?

Who is the real author?

3. King Cyrus made Persia a world power. While Daniel served under Cyrus, he very likely told him what God had foretold through His great prophets. What is foretold in the following references?

Jeremiah 25:11–12 and 29:10

Isaiah 44:26–28

4. How does Cyrus show his high regard for the true God in Ezra 1:2?

5. Tell how Cyrus financed the return of the Jews. What especially meaningful contribution did he make?

Ezra 3

6. What was the first act of the Jews upon returning to Jerusalem?

7. Give the conclusions you draw from the actions of the people.

8. How extensive was the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians?

What was the reaction of the older religious leaders when they saw the outline of the new temple?

9. As you read this chapter, what are you reminded of each time the children of God try to do something worthwhile for the Lord?

10. What was done to hinder the building of the temple and what resulted from this opposition?

Ezra 5 & 6

11. For fifteen years, the building was halted. Who were the two men who incited the resumption of the building?

12. What was of great assistance in the building of the temple according to 6:8?

13. Describe the various things Israel did to show their dedication to the Lord.

6:16

6:17

6:18

6:19

Ezra 7 & 8

14. The rebuilding of the temple is generally credited to Zerubbabel. What was Ezra's mission in Jerusalem according to 7:10?

15. We are deeply impressed by King Artaxerxes for his noble attitudes. Describe them from 7:21 & 25.

16. What important lesson does Ezra imply in 8:28 that we might remember for our own lives?

Ezra 9 & 10

17. What greatly disturbed Ezra the priest about his people?

18. Study Ezra's confession (9:6–15). If you used it as your confession, how would you restate it in two sentences?

19. What was the reaction of the people to the ministry of Ezra? (10:1–3)

20. Tradition has it that Ezra originated the Jewish synagogue, which helped gather the books of the Old Testament. For what are you especially grateful to Ezra?



GREAT PEOPLE

OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

EZRA



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Only in Jesus can we find true satisfaction. Only as we become acquainted with the Word of God and what it teaches us can we hope to be truly satisfied. The Cross is the place where the insecure are nourished. Jesus loves each one individually and when we fail, He is right there to forgive us.

EZRA – BEING TRULY SATISFIED

There are times in our lives when everything seems to go wrong and we become extremely pessimistic. Complete despair is only a step away. For this reason, let's look at the life of the priest, Ezra, which speaks to us about disillusionment.

We are coming to the end of the recorded history of God's chosen people in the Old Testament and looking at one of the great leaders He provided for them. The majority of the people had been taken away into exile. While some of the Jewish people were allowed to return to their homeland, many never had that privilege and the great dispersal of the Jews throughout the world had begun.

The man whose life we study today, Ezra, had a sizable influence on the exiles who returned to Judea. He was a great leader, a dedicated man of God who has much to say to us concerning life, as it exists in the confused world of today.

THE RETURN FROM BABYLON

This whole period is covered in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, and also in Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. There were two distinct periods during which some semblance of a kingdom was re-established before the Messiah came.

- The first period was during the years of 536–516 BC, when

Zerubbabel, the Governor, and Jeshua, the priest, rebuilt the temple and reinstated the worship of God to which the people were accustomed.

- The second period was from 457–432 BC when the new governor, Nehemiah, with the assistance of Ezra, the priest, rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem so that it again became a fortified city. The book of Ezra tells us of both these periods.

This captivity had been crushing to Israel's national pride. They were always boasting that they were the sons of Abraham who had never been in bondage to anyone because they were children of the one and only living God (John 8:33).

Israel thought that they had a special relationship with God like no one else. We know how zealous they were, at least outwardly, in their determination to have only the one God, Yahweh. As a result, they felt that their dedication merited His special favor upon them as a people. Can you then understand what this captivity must have done to them as they wondered why Yahweh had let them down and allowed them to suffer this indignity?

Their relationship to God centered very much in their temple at Jerusalem. Not only was that temple destroyed by their captors, but also they were completely cut off from it. They could no longer gather there to worship God and perform their religious duties, which to them had become the vital force of their culture. How empty that made their lives!

Lingering in the minds of these people was the oft-repeated promise of God that eventually He would send the Messiah. This Savior was to come from their nation and would bring salvation to His people. By now, they had begun to think of the Messiah more as a military deliverer than as a spiritual redeemer. Thus, this captivity really crushed their hopes that this promise would be fulfilled because at this time they could hardly be called a nation.

When the Babylonians marched the Jews away into captivity, they felt as though the world had come to an end for them. We can sympathize with them because

we are inclined to feel that way also when we see what is happening in our beloved country. Haven't we regarded ourselves as a special chosen people of God? But now people seem to have lost their sense of right and wrong and actually revel in doing evil. There is open unbelief and blasphemy. All this makes us feel that the end is near. That makes us sad, not for ourselves, because we know what is going to happen to us, but for the many who are a part of this downward movement and seemingly give no thought to it.

At the time of the Exile, the Lord felt that the Jews had learned their lesson and were now ready to turn back to Him in true repentance and to worship Him in spirit and in truth. So He compelled King Cyrus of Persia, who now ruled the kingdom in which the Jews were held captive, to command that all those who desired might return to their homeland under the leadership of Zerubbabel.

THE RETURN UNDER EZRA CAME LATER

With the encouragement of King Cyrus, the first thing to which these people devoted themselves was the rebuilding of the temple of God. This says something very important to us (Psalm 33:12; Proverbs 14:34; Psalm 144:15). While many people today feel that the church is not important and that going to church is not necessary, God has allowed the book of Ezra to come to us that we may know that our religious life is basic to our national welfare. The Jewish people realized the importance of this. They had only one temple that helped to unify them in their relationship and worship of their God.

BEING TRULY SATISFIED

An interruption in the story is in order. When Jesus fed the multitudes in the wilderness on a few loaves of bread and several fish, the Scriptures record, "And they all ate and were satisfied" (Matt. 15:37). This means more than the fact that the growling in their stomachs had come to an end. Jesus satisfied not only their physical hunger, but their spiritual hunger as well. Even before He gave them these loaves and fish, He had offered them the Bread of Life. All day long, He had been speaking to them the great truths that God had sent Him to reveal.

Praise God, we have had these same experiences. Jesus has fed us spiritually and physically. He has given us food and all that we need to support our body and life. He has helped us through crises; He has sustained us in many dangers; He has surely made us aware of His gracious willingness to help. Yet how quickly we forget. The very next crisis that arises in our life finds us stewing and fretting with our worries. Like the people in the wilderness, we cannot simply eat and be satisfied because there is always something else to interfere with our enjoyment of life.

Only in Jesus can we find true satisfaction. Only as we become acquainted with the Word of God and what it teaches us can we hope to be truly satisfied. The Cross is the place where the insecure are nourished. Jesus loves each one individually and when we fail, He is right there to forgive us. When our life seems purposeless, He shows us the things that we can do for Him. We discover that we can become so involved in doing things for Him that we have no time for our own selfish desires. With Jesus dwelling in us, we have an intravenous food source that is never disconnected. Jesus surges strength into us, and as the Holy Spirit moves in us and works in us, we find the kind of satisfaction that makes life worthwhile. Then we can look at ourselves and be satisfied in the right way.

The love of Jesus will heal any feelings of self-condemnation. We can even love ourselves and the things we do because we know that Jesus loves us. We can enjoy being ourselves by being thankful for the fact that God made us just the way we are, each a little different from anyone else. We have a security in our God and want to do something worthwhile with our life, especially to help other people find what we have found in Jesus. We who have felt the healing power of Christ in our lives can truly become the agents of healing to others. When this happens, we feel real satisfaction.

BACK TO EZRA

Ezra felt this satisfaction when he gathered with his people at the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. In his book, Ezra describes for us the manner in which the temple was reconstructed under the leadership of Zerubbabel.

It began, as it seems all projects in the Kingdom do, with a collection (Ezra 2:68) which was done freely and willingly. The dedication of the people showed itself in their desire to build the altar of the Lord first. They kept all the ceremonies as best they could even before the foundation for the temple was laid (3:1–6). But when the older people, who had seen the glorious temple of Solomon, saw the dimensions of the temple and its probable appearance, they wept with disappointment. As the glory of their nation had diminished, so also was the glory of their temple.

As always, the enemies of the Lord made things difficult. At first, they came to Zerubbabel and offered their assistance in building the temple (4:2), but the leaders of the Jews did not allow that. These people then went to Cyrus and asked him to stop the Jews from building their temple, and so the building project came to a halt (4:24).

But when Darius ascended to the throne, Zerubbabel, assisted by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah (5:1), felt comfortable in continuing the construction of the temple. Darius also provided necessary funds for this building (6:7–8). Finally, the day came when the temple was finished. With joy, God's people once again dedicated it to the glory of God. In total commitment, they observed the Passover. It had deep meaning for them because they knew that once again they had been brought out of bondage (6:18–19).

EZRA APPEARS ON THE SCENE

All that has been described thus far took place before the time of Ezra's arrival in Jerusalem. It is now the year 457 BC and the Persian King Artaxerxes sends Ezra back to Jerusalem with another contingent of Jews. Ezra is described as a man who was a ready scribe in the Law of Moses, a man steeped in the Scriptures, whose life made such an impression on the king that he had complete confidence in him (7:6). Ezra was sent to Jerusalem with this group of people in order to reestablish the moral principles for which this nation had always been known (7:10). It is fascinating that a heathen king should be concerned about these captive people! What is more, Ezra was

given authority by the king to appoint the necessary officials to accomplish his work. Ezra's reaction was to praise the Lord for His wonderful ways (7:25–28).

As Ezra led his group of people back to Jerusalem, he was most concerned about their spiritual condition (8:21). Ezra declared a fast that they “might humble ourselves before our God.” They needed to humble themselves and confess their sins to Him so that they might recognize His grace. Then they would be under the blessing of God and would assure themselves and their families that God was with them.

Ezra brought great treasure with him to assist in the re-establishment of the Jewish culture (8:24–25). He observed this would be most difficult because the people had forgotten that the Lord intended them to be a separate people and to serve only Him. Even among the religious leaders, there was evidence that they had become too much like the people all around them and were guilty of the same abominations. The need for Ezra's ministry was apparent (9:1).

EZRA'S CONFESSION OF SIN

To begin the work which he now sees clearly he must do, Ezra offers a sincere confession of sin (9:6–15). “O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you.” Do we have that sense of guilt that we blush when we feel ourselves in the presence of God? Are we conscious of the enormity of our sins and that they increase day by day until they “reach to heaven”? Do we see the progression of sin in our lives, as Ezra saw it in the lives of his people? Are we conscious of the increased immorality that betrays the spiritual condition of our day? The Lord, indeed, has reason to bring chastisement upon us as He did in allowing Israel to be brought into captivity. Are we aware that God's grace is still shown to us as it was to the remnant of His people who were released? Ezra does well to ask us, as he did his people, “Shall we break your commandments again?” (9:14).

EZRA ATTACKS THE PROBLEM

Instead of merely dealing with symptoms, Ezra goes to the source of the problem. As Ezra made his confession

before his people, the people wept, for they knew that he spoke the truth (10:1). They acknowledged their sins and expressed their faith in the promise of God concerning their salvation (10:2). Ezra then declared that if they were sincere in their proclamation they must put away their heathen wives and the children born of such marriages (10:10–11). All agreed that they would do this difficult thing and the task was begun.

Very abruptly, the book of Ezra comes to an end. As we study the book of Nehemiah, we discover that Ezra assisted in other reforms in the land. Tradition makes him the originator of the synagogue worship, which would be in full keeping with the purpose for which he had been sent back to Jerusalem. The intensive study of God's Word could hardly take place at the temple with the throngs of people there. The smaller synagogues provided a better opportunity. It is also thought that it was the formation of these synagogues which brought about the gathering of the Old Testament books as we have them today, and that it was the scribes we read about in Jesus' time who were engaged in making the copies of these books for use in the synagogues.

CONCLUSION

As Ezra looked back upon his life, he must have felt a deep spiritual satisfaction knowing that God had been able to use him for the spiritual growth of His people. It was possible because once again the Lord had become their Hope and their Guardian.

As the Lord becomes our One-and-all, we feel the urge to say with the Psalmist:

“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's” Psalm 103:1–5.

Yes, in Jesus we can be truly satisfied!