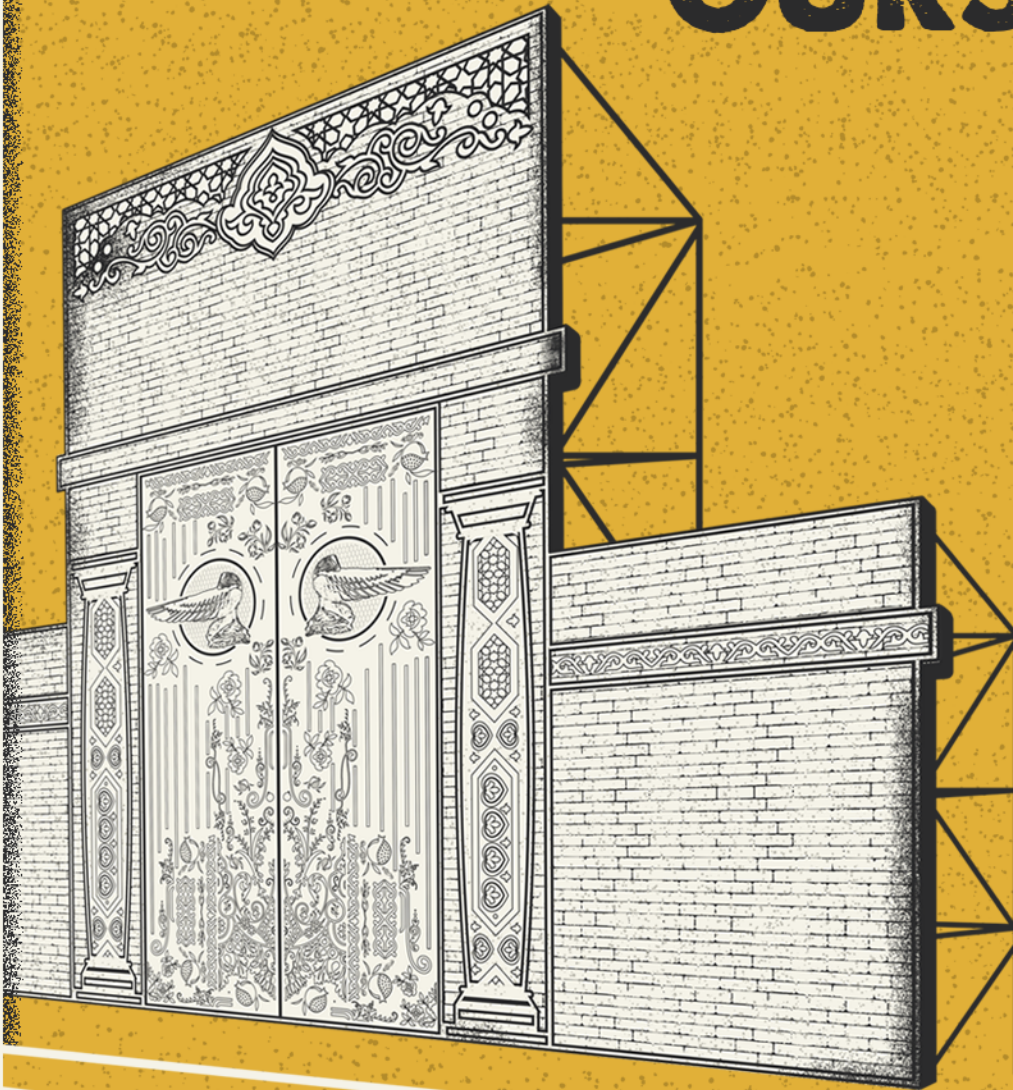


THE LIES WE TELL OURSELVES

the book of
EZRA



Discipleship Guide

Introduction	3
Important Info	5
Ezra 1:1-4	10
Ezra 1:5-11	15
Ezra 2	18
Ezra 3:1-6	22
Ezra 3:6-13	27
Ezra 4	32
Ezra 5	37
Ezra 6:1-15	42
Ezra 6:16-22	48

Introduction

In the Old Testament, there is a period of captivity summarized by the word “exile”. The exile began with the nation of Babylon conquering God’s people and destroying Jerusalem. This happened as a fulfillment of God’s covenant curse for their disobedience.

Yet God promised that this exile would come to an end after 70 years. This promise was fulfilled when King Cyrus of Persia allowed Israel to begin returning and rebuilding.

The book of Ezra records this return from exile. What God’s people come home to is a broken city and a ruined temple. Decades into this rebuilding process, the priest-scribe Ezra arrives to begin his work of *spiritual rebuilding*. Israel sees this as starting over, a new step out of the curse.

Yet in the midst of so much Spirit-empowered starting over - rebuilding, repentance, renewal - there are some significant moments of anti-climax built into Ezra. For example: the rebuilt temple? God doesn’t show up in glory like He did with Solomon’s temple (see 2 Chronicles 7). Why is this?

The anti-climactic nature of Ezra leads us to want - and recognize our need for - something more. Yes, God orchestrated this re-start, but along the way, the people of God were met with disappointments because they told themselves lies like,

"If we just get out of Babylon..."

"If we just build the altar and temple..."

"If we just divorce our unbelieving wives..."

Fundamentally, these returning exiles told themselves the lie that starting over would meet their greatest need.

Living in the lies we tell ourselves is like walking through a Hollywood production of Sherlock Holmes and believing it's London. But this facade isn't just inconvenient or damaging, it's eternally damning. No start over, devotion, or goodness on our part will bring us into right relationship with God and remove the wrath hanging over our heads; Jesus alone meets our greatest need. Until we meet Him, we exist in exile under the curse of God.

Important Info

Ezra covers almost 100 years of true history (538 BC - 457 BC).

And although the book bears his name, Ezra doesn't appear until chapter 7 of Ezra.

Book Breakdown

- **Ezra 1-2 focuses on the returning remnant**, the believers whom God protected while they were in exile.
- **Ezra 3-6 focuses on the rebuilding** of Jerusalem, including the altar and temple.
- **Ezra 7-10 focuses on the spiritual renewal** brought by the priest-scribe Ezra. This renewal happens about 57 years after the new temple dedication ceremony.

Ezra is a historical narrative/story. It's a story (*about the triune God bringing His people back and initiating rebuilding and renewal*) within the story of the Bible. Ezra isn't written *to us* or *about us*, but, as the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 15:4, Ezra is *for us*. There's much to learn about God, human nature, and the salvation promised and provided by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Key Words, Locations, and Names

Exile

A word meaning “away from home”. We see exile when the Israelites are conquered by Babylon and taken away from their homes as captives. This was God’s covenant curse upon the Israelites for their continual sin against Him (see Jeremiah 25).

Exile is a theme present throughout Scripture, starting in Genesis 3 when Adam, the representative of all humanity, was exiled from the presence of God due to his sin against God. Israel, God’s chosen people, also sin against Him and are exiled as a consequence. And we, too, have sinned against God and therefore remain exiled from His holy presence. Jesus arrives as the second Adam, truly God and truly human, and perfectly obeys for us then suffers the ultimate exile under God’s wrath in our place. By trusting Jesus, we are reconciled to God. And as Christians, we live in the tension of having our exile from God resolved while also waiting for Jesus to return to bring us - physically - into our true home, the new creation.

Babylon

The ancient city where Israel was led as captives in exile. Babylon was the capitol of the Babylonian empire. While it was an actual city, Babylon is used figuratively in some parts of the Bible (1 Peter and Revelation) to refer to evil and sinful empires. Cyrus, the king of Persia, eventually conquered and captured Babylon.

Persia

An ancient empire that conquered the Babylonians. Since Persia took over Babylonian territory, the Persians were in charge of Jerusalem during the time period of Ezra when Cyrus, king of Persia, allowed the Jewish people to return to Jerusalem.

Jerusalem

Nicknamed the "City of David" because king David conquered the city and made it the center of Israel's life. The city became even more significant when David's son, king Solomon, built the temple in Jerusalem, thus making the city the center of worship for God's people. Jerusalem is eventually destroyed by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar and God's people are led into exile.

Ezra

Both a priest and a scribe whose family line goes back to Moses's brother Aaron. Ezra grew up in exile but remained faithful to Yahweh, the God of Israel. He also likely held some sort of position of influence with the Persian king Artaxerxes. Ezra doesn't come to Jerusalem until 57 years after the temple has been rebuilt (in Ezra chapter 7).

Zerubbabel

A leader among the returning exiles. He had a royal lineage (see Haggai 2:23).

Jeshua

A leader and priest among the returning exiles (see Haggai 1:1 where his name is spelled "Joshua").

Haggai

A prophet present among the returning exiles whose prophecies from God motivate the continuing rebuild of the temple (see the book of Haggai in the Old Testament).

Zechariah

A prophet present among the returning exiles whose prophecies from God motivate the continuing rebuild of the temple (see the book of Zechariah in the Old Testament).

Cyrus

The Persian king God used to begin fulfilling His promise to bring His people back to the Promised Land (i.e. Jerusalem). Cyrus's announcement to the exiled people is prophesied in Isaiah 44:28 and Jeremiah 29:10-14.

Artaxerxes

Pronounced "Art-uh-zerk-sees". King of Persia about 57 years after the new temple is finished in Jerusalem. Artaxerxes gives Ezra authority to establish God's Law in Jerusalem.

Ezra 1:1-4

MAIN POINT

We will not find ultimate rest or belonging in this world, but only in Jesus. And Jesus is totally sovereign, working through various people and means to fulfill His promises, including the promise to one day return.

GROUP INTRO

In this week's passage we see that God is sovereign over world leaders. Are there any recent world events that have made you question God's control and authority? Why do you think you had that reaction?

TEXT

1. Before Ezra, God used prophets like Jeremiah to warn the Israelites that their sin would bring exile but that God would also restore them. Read Jeremiah's words in Jeremiah 25:3, 7-9 and Jeremiah 29:10. According to Ezra 1:1-4, how does God fulfill the promises He spoke through Jeremiah?

Leader help: God uses an unbelieving king¹, Cyrus, to basically give the Israelites an authoritative permission slip to return to Jerusalem. Not only this, but Cyrus commands that the Israelites be given silver, gold, and all necessary supplies for rebuilding.

2. What evidences of God's love and grace do you see in Ezra 1:1-4?

Leader help: Below are a few evidences of God's grace.

(1) God made promises of restoration to people who were rebelling against Him; (2) God gave His people prophets to speak on His behalf; (3) God communicated warnings and promises to sinful humanity instead of immediately condemning them; (4) God fulfilled His promises, demonstrating His trustworthiness; (5) God used an unbelieving leader and nation to restore and provide for His people; (6) God provided for the rebuilding of the temple so that His people could worship and enjoy Him.

¹ We suspect that Cyrus isn't truly a follower of God because archaeological digs have uncovered another proclamation from Cyrus where he uses the same language ("the God of heaven") to talk about the gods of other nations.

3. Read Proverbs 21:1 and Exodus 7:3, then read Ezra 1:1. What do these passages reveal to us about God?

Leader help: God is totally sovereign, authoritative, present, and all-powerful and He uses His sovereign power to bring both judgment and grace. We also see that He works through people - even powerful leaders - to accomplish His purposes.

4. The book of Malachi, written some time after the return to Jerusalem, shows us that exile, a return to the Promised Land, and a rebuilt temple didn't transform God's people. Why is this? What was missing?

Leader help: Without the Holy Spirit, God's judgment and blessings don't transform sinners.

God's people received His gifts - the temple, the altar, Promised Land - but these couldn't take away sin or bring them from spiritual death to life. They needed to be forgiven and transformed from the inside out, something that could only be accomplished through Jesus and the gift of His Spirit. As John writes,

For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17).

APPLICATION

1. The Israelites were in exile for decades, waiting on God to fulfill His promises. We, too, are waiting for God to fulfill His promise to bring a new creation. Read 2 Peter 3:10-13. What does it look like to wait *with faith* for the return of Jesus? What kind of emotions or behaviors might show up when we're *not* waiting in faith?
2. In Jesus, God has given us complete freedom from the worst exile of all (being separated from God). What are some biblical promises that you hold onto now that you trust Jesus?
3. Knowing that God is in control of world empires, how can we enter into conversations about current conflicts or unrest to talk about the hope of Jesus?

PRAYER

Thank God for bringing you out of exile and into His family.

Passage to guide your prayers: Romans 5:10-11

Cry out to God on behalf of those who are still living in exile from Him. Ask God to save them and bring them to Himself.

Passage to guide your prayers: Matthew 11:27-28

Admit to God how you've not trusted Him this week and ask for the Spirit's help to rest in His grace.

Passage to guide your prayers: Psalm 56:3

Ezra 1:5-11

MAIN POINT

In a scene similar to the exodus from Egypt, God brings the Israelites out of exile and into the promised land with abundant blessings, but Israel's exile from God remains unresolved until Jesus arrives to complete the even greater exodus.

GROUP INTRO

Has there been a time in your life when God unexpectedly provided for you? Describe your experience.

TEXT

1. Read Exodus 12:35-36. What are some similarities between this event and what we read in Ezra 1?

Leader help: In Exodus, God motivates unbelieving Egyptians to give the Israelites treasure and supplies so that they can leave their slavery and go worship God. Similarly, in Ezra God motivates unbelieving Persians to supply His people for their journey back to Jerusalem where they can rebuild and worship Him.

2. Who does God motivate to help this exodus from exile and what does He motivate them to do?

Leader help: God motivates the leaders of His people ("the heads of the fathers' houses...") to spearhead the journey back to Jerusalem. He then motivates the common Persian people and the Persian king Cyrus to give the Israelites all that they'll need to travel back to Jerusalem.

3. This passage tells us that God "stirred" or motivated individuals to bless and help His people. What does this tell us about God?

Leader help: God is sovereign (He can change desires and motivations), gracious (blessing sinners who don't deserve blessing), generous (providing all His people need), and He is personally attentive and active (He knows the long journey they have and how poor they are as exiles and organizes help for them that they couldn't get for themselves).

4. Why is it important that the priests and Levites also return to Jerusalem? What role did they play in the life of Israel?

Leader help: These are the religious leaders of God's people. This shows that worship in all areas of life must be extremely important for all who belong to God, and it shows the high value that God places on worship because He knows how transformative it is for us.

APPLICATION

1. God can bring the desire and motivation needed to sacrifice for His mission. What do you usually do when you don't feel like coming to group, evangelizing, or serving? What would it look like to turn to God and ask Him to change your desires?
2. What in this passage drives you to worship God?
3. When Jesus frees us from our sin He also provides all that we need to continue following Him. What specifically are you or your loved ones needing Jesus to provide right now (this could be spiritual, physical, emotional, or mental provision)?

PRAYER

Are there any missionaries or ministries that you know that could use help? Take time to pray for them together.

Passage to guide your prayers: 2 Corinthians 8:13-15

Praise Jesus for freeing you from your slavery to sin and ask Him to do the same for others.

Passage to guide your prayers: John 8:35-36

Ezra 2

MAIN POINT

As the exiles return, they are reminded that God has a family made up of individuals who all have a face and name known to Him. Ezra 2 stands as a testimony that nothing will break God's faithfulness, a truth Israel would one day see demonstrated when Jesus - who descended from some of these names - would come to redeem all whose names are written in "the Lamb's book of life"².

GROUP INTRO

Has anyone in group ever looked into their family history/genealogy? Did you find anything interesting about your history? Why do you think we want to investigate our family history?

² See Revelation 21:27

TEXT

1. Look at Ezra 2:1. According to this verse, what purpose does this long list of names serve?

Leader help: These names are a record of God's people and their descendants who were exiled. This list would have helped Israel's leaders know who truly belonged to the community of God's people and also who could serve in the temple and serve as priests, which shows that the exiles were still concerned about the holiness God commanded them to care about.

2. This list of names was compiled after the exiles returned. What are some ways that the existence of this record could have encouraged future generations of God's people?

Leader help: God never gave up on, forgot, or abandoned His people. He cares deeply for them, even numbering each person and ensuring that they received the security of knowing they belonged to the community that received God's covenant promises.

3. Most of these names don't belong to anyone who plays a big role in the story of the Bible. Why, then, are they included here and important to God?

Leader help: Simply because God chose to care for them and love them. This list demonstrates His great love and care for individual people. The list also shows that God is faithful to His promises even when life is dark and difficult (like when Israel experienced His judgment of exile).

4. Much like those numbered in Ezra 2, those today who trust in Jesus have their name written down, not in the Bible, but in “the Lamb’s book of life”. Read Revelation 21:22-27. What does it mean to have your name written in this book? If you’re a Christian, how does knowing your name is written in God’s book help you live for Him? If you’re not a Christian, what would you say is required to have God include you in this book?

Leader help: To have your name written in the Lamb’s book of life is to belong to the triune God through faith alone in Jesus alone. This means you are permanently a member of God’s kingdom, a son or daughter in His family forever. It means that God is attentive to you, working for your good, and dedicated to one day bringing you into a new physical creation, free from sin and death.

APPLICATION

1. Describe some ways Jesus and His people have assured you that you belong to and are seen by Him.
2. How will you help make others feel seen, known, and welcomed on Sundays and throughout the week?

3. What words or actions within the church have made it difficult to believe that you are seen and known? What are some ways we as a group could help you on your path of healing?
4. The people who were counted in Ezra 2 mattered to God simply because they belonged to Him. Our culture, however, promotes the idea that your worth is tied to your performance³. What in Scripture contradicts this lie? Where do we find evidence that God loves us simply because He chooses to, not because of our performance?⁴

PRAYER

Celebrate the fact that God continues to make sinners belong to His family

Passage to guide your prayers: John 6:44-45

Surrender any unhealed wounds you've experienced amongst the people of God.

Passage to guide your prayers: Psalm 10:17

Ask God to root you in His love and acceptance.

Passage to guide your prayers: Galatians 2:20

³ I.e. if you work hard and contribute, you'll be welcomed as significant and important; if you get the right possessions or employment, you'll be accepted and acceptable; if you look a certain way, you'll be beautiful and admired, etc.

⁴ See 1 John 4:9-10; Romans 5:8-10; Luke 15

Ezra 3:1-6

MAIN POINT

During one of the most important months for the Israelites - when they'd usually mark the Day of Atonement and the Festival of Booths - the returning exiles start to worship in the midst of their fear. But even our most obedient, "by-the-book" law-keeping worship doesn't keep us safe from the threat of death; we need the ultimate priest who didn't offer an animal but offered Himself, Jesus the Messiah.

GROUP INTRO

This week we see the Israelites rebuilding the altar so they can worship. When you hear the word "worship" what images or ideas come to mind?

TEXT

1. In Ezra 3:1, it says that the people gathered together as one in Jerusalem. Why was it important for the Israelites to gather together in unity? How does this relate to the unity God desires in the church today?

Leader help: God has always a group of people, not lone individuals. It would have been crucial for the Israelites to have unity because of the dangers of coming back to Jerusalem after 70 years (people had moved into the area and Jerusalem no longer had protective walls). There were no police officers and they didn't have an army, so they sought safety in God and the community He gave.

We may not face the exact same external dangers, but we are still vulnerable and weak, susceptible to despair, demonic attack, and external hostility. We, too, need the community of God's church.

2. Verses 2-3 describe the rebuilding of the altar and the offering of sacrifices. Why did they rebuild the altar and start worshiping? What is significant about them prioritizing worship in the midst of so much risk?

Leader help: Ezra 3:2-3 gives us two reasons: (1) they wanted to worship "as it is written", i.e. according to Scripture, after not being able to do so in roughly 70 years and (2) they were afraid. In the midst of all the risks associated with returning to Jerusalem and their own fear, they turn to God as their true hope. They went into exile partially because they had stopped trusting God.

3. Why were God's people commanded to offer sacrifices and celebrate festivals? What do the commands to sacrifice reveal to us about God?

Leader help: The cost of sin is death, but God allowed an animal to be substituted in the place of those who trusted Him through the sacrificial system He set up for His people. Ultimately, God's people were only ever forgiven because Christ later came as the Lamb of God who was sacrificed on the cross, paying the penalty for their sins. Through their faith in God, they were forgiven and reconciled to Him.

The commands to sacrifice reveal both God's holiness and His grace. He didn't have to provide a way for them to be with Him, but He did.

4. These returning exiles, who hadn't been able to rightly worship God with sacrifices and celebrations in nearly 70 years, worship God "as it is written". Why were they so concerned to worship the way the Scriptures told them to?

Leader help: There are a number of factors that could have motivated them to obey Scripture: (1) Their disobedience to God's Word brought the punishment of exile; (2) They saw God's grace and faithfulness in bringing them back home and therefore trusted that His Word is truth; (3) They were convinced that God alone was their hope and protection; (4) They were given good, godly leaders like Jeshua and Zerubbabel who helped them prioritize God's Word.

APPLICATION

1. What are some of your fears?⁵ When you experience these fears, what's your go-to response? Do you turn to Jesus in worship or to something else? Why?
2. The book of Hebrews says this: *"And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God."*⁶ How might your attitude, emotions, and priorities shift if you were able to rest in the total, permanent forgiveness accomplished by Jesus? What are some ways to experience this kind of rest?
3. How does trusting and worshiping Jesus bring true unity to the church? In your mind, what's beautiful about this unity?
4. Who we give our trust and allegiance to ends up shaping who we become and how we think, act, and speak. In worshiping Jesus over the last year, how have you been changed?

⁵ To build strong community, vulnerability is key. Try leading the way by being the first to admit some of your deeper fears such as being alone, getting rejected, being fired, etc.

⁶ Hebrews 10:11-12

PRAYER

Isaac Watts wrote the following lyrics:

*"Not all the blood of beasts
On Jewish altars slain,
Could give the guilty conscience peace,
Or wash away the stain.
But Christ the heavenly Lamb,
Takes all our sins away;
A sacrifice of nobler name
And richer blood than they."*⁷

Pray in response to God's love for us:

Thank Jesus for His sacrifice.

Admit and confess how you have failed to worship God in the midst of your fears.

Ask the Holy Spirit for His help to worship when you're afraid.

⁷ "Not All the Blood of Beasts" by Isaac Watts. See the following video for a modern rendition: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-TI5vYIEnHA>

Ezra 3:6-13

MAIN POINT

The foundation for a new temple is finished to the sounds of praise, crying, and shouting. This rebuilding project highlights the faithfulness of God, who promised that He would dwell among His people, because the temple was the visible sign of God's presence⁸. But the exiles couldn't have imagined how God would ultimately fulfill this promise: in Jesus, God came to dwell among us, reconcile us to Himself, and make us "living stones" who are built up together⁹.

GROUP INTRO

Beginning the temple rebuild brought energy to God's people. List three things that bring you energy and tell your group why.

⁸ Exodus 29:45; Leviticus 26:12

⁹ John 1:14; 1 Peter 2:4-10

TEXT

1. What's so significant about the temple being called "the house of God" or "the house of the LORD" in these verses?

Leader help: In the Old Testament the temple is a visible sign of God's presence as well as the place where God's people gathered to worship Him, so when the temple was destroyed, it meant more to the Israelites than a ruined building - it communicated the removal of God's protection and presence.

2. Knowing that the temple was more than a building to the returned exiles, why is there praise, thanksgiving, weeping, and joy when the foundation of a new temple is built?

Leader help: The return of the temple communicated God's faithfulness to His promises. He had promised to one day bring the exiles back and restore them. They're excited to have the visible sign of God's presence and a place to properly worship Him.

3. Imagine the scene of Ezra 3. You were in exile for decades and you've come back to a ruined, dangerous Jerusalem. All you have is an altar and the foundation for a new temple. What, then, prompts God's people to sing about His goodness and enduring love?

Leader help: God graciously chose Israel and made promises to them (committing to bringing a Savior through them, granting forgiveness for their sins, and being with them). In Ezra 3, God's people are recognizing that the character of God doesn't change, whether they're in Babylon or Jerusalem. What He promises to do, He will do, because that's who He is.

4. Verses 10-11 focus on musical worship. How does this musical worship impact God's people? Where else in Scripture do we see the necessity and beauty of musical worship?

Leader help: The musical worship motivates the people to praise and give thanks, which would have been a powerful motivator for them to continue doing the hard work of rebuilding. The book of Psalms shows us that musical worship is necessary and beautiful for God's people because music helps us remember God's goodness.

APPLICATION

1. The ultimate demonstration of God's steadfast love is Jesus becoming a man, dwelling among us and dying for us so that we can be free. Read Galatians 1:3-4. What are some specific desires, acts, or dangers that Jesus rescued you from?
2. 1 Peter 2 tells us that Christians are being "built up" to be a spiritual house. Thinking about how God has created and gifted you, what are some ways you can help build others up?
3. The noise of God's people praising Him was so loud that it could be heard from far away (verse 13). When we're vocal about God's goodness, no matter our circumstances, what message is sent to those who don't know Him? How can you be vocal about God's goodness this week?
4. How can we cultivate an attitude of gratitude and worship, even in difficult circumstances, like we see demonstrated in this passage?

Leader help: You can direct attention to Luke 17:11-19 where we see lepers, who are totally desperate for change yet helpless to change themselves, beg Jesus for healing. One of the lepers receives healing, and it's Jesus's mercy and grace that cultivate his gratitude. The more we simply return to Jesus in desperation and receive His grace and mercy, the more thankful we'll become.

PRAYER

Adoration: Worship God for His goodness.

Passage to guide your prayers: 1 Peter 1:3

Confession: Admit to God how you have failed to trust Him and praise Him when life was difficult.

Passage to guide your prayers: Mark 14:66-68

Thanksgiving: Thank God for sending Jesus, who willingly dwelled among us and died for us.

Passage to guide your prayers: John 1:14

Supplication: Ask the Holy Spirit to give you the willingness and opportunity to bless and build up others, especially those who don't know Jesus.

Passage to guide your prayers: 1 Corinthians 9:22-23

Ezra 4

MAIN POINT

Much like the first entrance into the Promised Land, God's people now face opposition as they seek to settle in at home. Despite their zeal, the pressures and dangers around them put a pause on their hard work.

Yet the Lord proves once again that even when we experience the most unexpected stops He hasn't let go of the wheel of history. God will settle His people into their true home, with rest from all enemies, at great cost to Himself.

GROUP INTRO

Check-in with one another: what was your high for the week and what was your low for the week?

TEXT

1. Ezra 4:1-3 is strange when it's first read. After all, the returned exiles absolutely refuse help from their neighbors. Why do you think the exiles refused the help?

Leader help: The exiles knew that these neighbors weren't genuine worshipers of the true God.

*Notice what the neighbors say: "...we worship your God as **you do...**"*

*Compare that with the response from God's people: "**You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God...**"*

It's likely that many people had no issue with believing that Israel's God was a god, but they had an issue with God claiming to be the only God and demanding that He alone be worshiped.

2. The exiles stopped rebuilding for almost 20 years¹⁰. In other words, for 20 years they let fear and circumstances prevent them from properly honoring God. Yet some of God's first words to them are gracious. Read Haggai 1:13-15. How might God's love have impacted these exiles?

Leader help: We see later in Ezra that the rebuilding continued, all because the reminder of God's love and presence gave them strength to get back up and start again even after years of failure.

3. Verses 6-23 contain the historical record of events that happened long after the events of verses 1-5, showing that the exiles faced opposition for a long time. Knowing that the exiles eventually begin to rebuild, why does Ezra show us how much opposition the exiles faced? What does this reveal to us about God?

Leader help: We get to see God's faithfulness over the long haul and in the face of a lot of difficulties. This tells us that even very long periods of darkness aren't proof that God has left us or is powerless.

¹⁰ Verse 5 states, "All the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia," and verse 24 tells us the stoppage continued until the second year of Darius's reign, representing a period of 18 years. See also Haggai 1:1-13 and Zechariah 1.

4. Earlier in the biblical story God promised king David that He would one day give true rest and a true home to His people. Read Read 2 Samuel 7:10-13. Why wasn't this return to Jerusalem and a rebuilt altar and temple foundation enough to give God's people rest? What was missing?

Leader help: The missing piece was Jesus, whose atoning sacrifice opened the way for the true rest God's people need, the rest guaranteed to be ours when Jesus returns again. Not only this, but as long as we live in this broken world with broken bodies we will not experience God's ultimate rest. But Jesus promises that He goes before us to prepare a place for us, a place of rest and beauty in His kingdom (see John 14:1-3). Until the return of Christ, we experience the effects of our sin and the sin of others (see 2 Peter 3:13).

APPLICATION

1. When God puts a pause on important, fulfilling, or fruitful experiences in your life, do you tend to isolate or turn to community? Why? How has this tendency impacted you?
2. What are some good and necessary changes that God has accomplished in you through long trials or difficulties

3. How can both holding onto God's covenant promises of rest and expecting trouble now, help us prepare to face difficulties?

Leader help: In John 16:33 Jesus tells us that we will continue to face trouble in this world, but our rest will come from Him and trusting that He truly has overcome all evil.

4. Jesus promised that He's preparing a place in His kingdom for all who trust Him. How can you bring this truth to unbelievers in your life this week?

PRAYER

Pray for God to give you a renewed perspective on the times of pause He brings into your life.

Passage to guide your prayers: Romans 12:2

Thank God for His gracious response to your failures and sins.

Passage to guide your prayers: Proverbs 28:13

Ask God to help you stay hopeful and honest in the midst of long periods of trouble.

Passage to guide your prayers: Psalm 32:7

Ezra 5

MAIN POINT

Work on the second temple had stopped, which meant that God's people didn't prioritize worship. But God is gracious and responds by ensuring worship will happen by provoking a restart. We might wonder why God does this - does He *need* to be worshiped?

God set up the temple and the system of worship not for Himself but for His people, as a gift meant to spark and sustain their joy and point forward to the best gift of all: God giving us new hearts and dwelling within us, securing our worshipful eternity with Him.

GROUP INTRO

Pastor and theologian Sam Storms wrote that *"God has hardwired into our souls a yearning, a longing, an unrelenting passion for pleasure."*¹¹

So what activities or experiences do you seek out that bring you joy? Why?

¹¹ Enjoying God, An Essay by Sam Storms for The Gospel Coalition.

TEXT

1. What's the response when God's prophets bring His word to His people? What does this tell us about God's word?

Leader help: The people are convicted, repent, and obediently return to the rebuilding effort. This tells us that God's word is authoritative, divinely inspired, and not only tells us what obedience looks like but empowers and provokes obedience. This truth is captured in Isaiah 55:10-11 and Hebrews 4:12.

2. Why is rebuilding the "house of God" (a.k.a. the temple) so crucially important?

Leader help: The temple was the physical symbol of God's presence and faithfulness; it was where worship took place in the form of atoning sacrifices, singing, prayers, and more. Since God made us to enjoy Him, nobody is truly satisfied until they can enjoy and worship God. The temple provided this for God's people.

3. Take turns reading Haggai 1:3-10. What were God's people doing instead of rebuilding and worshiping Him? What was happening as a result of their disobedience?

Leader help: They were settling into their own homes and living their ordinary lives (planting crops, building, growing, etc.). They were experiencing a life of emptiness and futility, doing hard work but receiving little to nothing in return, because God was disciplining them for their rejection of Him.

4. When the governor asks who it is that's doing this rebuilding, God's people respond with their history. Take turns reading Ezra 5:11-16. What do God's people highlight in this response? How are they viewing all that has happened to them, from exile to the current moment?

Leader help: They highlight their identity (servants of God), God's identity (the God of heaven and earth), God's work in the past, their sin in the past, and God's faithfulness even after exile. They also name specific kings and decrees that the governor could investigate.

God's people view their history as ultimately being in the hands of God - He saved them, gave them a place of worship, warned them, disciplined them, and faithfully brought them back with all the supplies necessary.

APPLICATION

1. Sometimes we may think of sin in terms of overtly horrible acts, but as Haggai 1 showed us, sin can look like ignoring God while doing ordinary things. If someone looked at your life for the last week, would they conclude that Jesus is your priority? Why or why not?

2. To help us live a life of worship, the Holy Spirit shows us who Jesus really is and what He's like. Take turns reading the following passages to provoke true joy and worship:

1. Luke 15:1-7

2. Hosea 11:8-9

3. Romans 5:7-9

4. Matthew 11:28-30

5. Isaiah 25:6-9

6. John 6:37

3. How would you explain why you worship and obey Jesus to those who don't know Him as Lord and Savior?

4. In Ezra 5, God is described as the God "who was over them", i.e. God is present, active, and authoritative. Describe a time in your life when God actively brought you out of disobedience. How did He do this and what did you get out of this experience?

PRAYER

Express what you love about God to Him. Thank Him for any specific characteristics of His that stick out to you.

Passage to guide your prayers: Psalm 22:22-23

Admit to God why you don't believe that He will satisfy you and how you have neglected Him in your ordinary life.

Passage to guide your prayers: Psalm 62:8

Ask the Holy Spirit to bring you into true worship and enjoyment of God, even when you experience His discipline.

Passage to guide your prayers: John 7:37-39

Ezra 6:1-15

MAIN POINT

God's people are given all that they need - including the unwavering support of a foreign king - for the temple rebuild. This new structure, however, won't be the end of the story. God isn't interested in Israel making a u-turn; He's moving history toward the arrival of His Son and the redemption He will provide.

GROUP INTRO

This week's passage reveals the importance of historical records. If you got to choose to live in any period of history, which would you choose and why?

TEXT

1. Let's review where we are so far in Ezra. What just happened in Ezra 5 and how do those events relate to Ezra 6:1-15?

Leader help: In Ezra 5, the people are confronted by a governor who asks them to justify their construction project. They inform the governor why they're building and he in turn writes to the king, Darius, asking him to look for any proof to validate what he's been told by the people. Chapter 6 is Darius's reply.

2. Describe the different ways we see God's providence in Ezra 6:1-15. As a reminder, a basic definition for providence is below:

Providence: God's active, wise, and loving guardianship and care for His creatures and creation.¹²

Leader help: Here's how God cared for the remnant as seen in this passage:

- A. He kept the historical records in tact and accessible.
- B. He ensured that Darius was a leader who was willing to do things "by the book", a leader who would search for records and do the right thing rather than just crush any problems in Jerusalem.
- C. He previously appointed Cyrus and ensured that Cyrus would make a favorable declaration for His people (see Isaiah 44:28, 45:1-4).
- D. He ensured that His people would not only be allowed to build but would be freely given all supplies for building and for sacrificing.
- E. He ensured that Darius would add his own threat to his declaration (see verses 11-12), thus securing the success of His people's efforts.
- F. Going even further back, God had provided the temple, the sacrificial system, the city of Jerusalem, and a covenant to His people, not because they deserved it but because He wanted to.

¹² "Providence" describes God sovereignly acting in His creation, while "sovereignty" describes the fact that God actually can do whatever He decides to do.

3. In this passage, we see several key terms that play a big role in God's plan of redemption. What role did each of the following play in God's plan? How do they point forward to Jesus?

- A. Jerusalem
- B. "House of God"/temple
- C. Prophets
- D. Offerings/sacrifices

Leader help:

Jerusalem: *the city that became the capital of Israel under king David and the place where God dwelt with His people. The city represents the covenant relationship between God and believers. Since the death and resurrection of Jesus, we no longer look to the earthly city of Jerusalem; we look forward to the heavenly Jerusalem, the new creation, where we will physically live with God forever. We become citizens of this new Jerusalem by faith in Jesus. See Hebrews 11:10, 12:22 and Revelation 21:2.*

House of God: *the physical structure where God dwelled with His people, meant to remind them of the Garden of Eden. In Jesus, God came to us, pursuing sinners with grace and mercy. We no longer have to travel to a specific structure, for we ourselves are the dwelling place of God - when we trust Jesus, the Holy Spirit indwells us. See 1 Peter 2:4-5 and 1 Corinthians 3:16.*

The temple in Jerusalem was ultimately destroyed in 70 AD, just as Jesus said would happen (see Luke 21:6).

Prophets: men appointed and empowered by God to verbally speak His words to His people. Most of the time, prophets acted like prosecutors, telling God's people to repent or face judgment. They also reminded God's people of the hope to come after said judgment. That hope was ultimately fulfilled in Jesus and His life, death, and resurrection.

Jesus is God's final prophet, not only speaking God's words but bearing the judgment we deserved on the cross, and guaranteeing the hope of a new creation for all who trust in Him. See Matthew 5:17 and Hebrews 1:1-2.

Offerings/sacrifices: the animal sacrifices temporarily covering sin as a foreshadowing of the final sacrifice of Jesus, the perfect and sinless Lamb of God. Though we all deserve death, including God's people who returned from exile, God had provided these offerings and sacrifices as a visible demonstration of His forgiveness and the removal of guilt. It is significant that after our representative Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden, God clothed them with animal skins, showing that God provided a covering that Adam and Eve couldn't provide for themselves.

APPLICATION

1. God fully and completely provides all that's necessary for a thriving relationship with Him. What are some of the gifts that God gives us to help us be close with Him? What specifically gets in-between you and God?
2. As a group, come up with at least 15 ways God lovingly and graciously cares for us every day. How do you feel knowing that God is this attentive and kind?
3. Is anyone in group experiencing burdens that we can jump in and help with? What are these burdens? How might we best bear these burdens with you?
4. Without a right view of God's providence, we tend to think life is directed by fate, our own choices, or our perspective/mindset. Why do we struggle with trusting God's providence? How can the grace and love of Jesus strengthen our trust in God's providence?

PRAYER

Ask God to save those who do not yet trust Him.

Passage to guide your prayers: Isaiah 45:22

Thank Jesus for His unfathomable, strong love for you, and ask Him to help you trust His providence.

Passage to guide your prayers: John 15:9

Ask the Holy Spirit for help to live a life of faith-filled risk and generosity so that others can be blessed.

Passage to guide your prayers: Acts 20:35

Ezra 6:16-22

MAIN POINT

The section of Ezra focused on the first wave of rebuilding exiles comes to a close with a temple dedication and a joyful Passover. God has been faithful and the efforts of godly leaders over a period of decades are rewarded.

Yet this is far from the end of Ezra, and far from the end of God's story. Even though this remnant faithfully offers 712 of their best animals, we know that "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4).

It is not our efforts that will produce permanent joy and true reconciliation with God, but Jesus's efforts on our behalf.

GROUP INTRO

One of the most important activities for Christians is prayer. A simple way to grow your prayer life is the acronym J.O.Y.: Jesus, Others, Yourself.

When you pray, do you focus most on Jesus (who He is and what He's done), others, or yourself? Why?

TEXT

1. An often overlooked but crucially important part of Bible study is **observation**. Look together at this passage. What action words/verbs do you notice? Who is doing what? What is God doing or what has God done?

2. How is God identified, named, or described in this passage? What does this tell us about God?

Leader help: He is the God "at Jerusalem" (v. 18), "the LORD, the God of Israel" (v. 21), and, again, the "God of Israel" (v. 22).

Since the Bible is God's revelation of Himself, this tells us that God often chooses to be known by His relationship with His people. He isn't ashamed to be associated with this lowly, sinful nation, but actually wants to be publicly known as the one who loves sinners.

3. We read in verse 17 that animals were sacrificed "as a sin offering". What is a sin offering? What does the necessity of a sin offering tell us about God and about humanity? For help, read the following passages from Leviticus:

- a) Leviticus 4:1-3
- b) Leviticus 4:27-28
- c) Leviticus 5:4-6

Leader help on the following page.

Leader help: a sin offering was an animal that could be killed in the place of a sinner as a substitute for him or her. God is holy and cannot ignore sin, therefore all sin must be punished. Instead of the sinner dying, God provided a system where a substitute could die, thus providing a way for people to find acceptance with a holy God. Of course, these sacrifices never actually took away sin, they pointed forward to Jesus and His final sacrifice, revealed God's holiness, and showed humanity their sinful condition which they could not overcome on their own.

4. Describe the Passover - how did Passover become a part of Israel's rhythms of worship? What is remembered or celebrated during Passover? How does Passover point us forward to Jesus?

Leader help: See Exodus 12:1-14 for context. God wanted to free His people from their slavery in Egypt, but Egypt's leadership refused to obey God's demands. Therefore, God promised to kill all the firstborn in response, and gave Israel a way out of this wrath: if they sacrificed a lamb and put its blood on their doorposts, God's wrath would "pass over" them. God freeing His people and graciously passing over them because of the blood of their substitute lamb was celebrated annually, and pointed forward to Jesus, the perfect Lamb of God, whose shed blood frees those who by nature are slaves to their sin.

APPLICATION

1. God's people were attentive and obedient to His Word and they experienced joy as a result. We live in a world dominated by distractions, which makes enjoying God and His work difficult. What role does your phone, social media, or TV play in hindering your obedience and joy?
2. Individualism has influenced us in many ways, impacting how we participate in God's community. Do you think of yourself as a vitally important member of God's community? Do you view the growth, holiness, and spiritual health of those in the church as partly your responsibility? Why or why not?
3. The leaders appointed by God in Ezra played an important role in helping the people return and rebuild. Have you ever thought about or desired a leadership role in God's church? How can we help you on that journey?
4. What acts of God in Ezra so far have impacted you the most? Why?

PRAYER

Pray the J.O.Y. prayer using the prompts below:

Jesus - Praise Jesus for both His substitutionary death in your place and the perfect life He lived for you. Praise Him for the love that He has for you and will always have for you.

Passage to guide your prayers: Romans 8:1-4

Others - Pray for specific people in your group, your church, and your neighborhood. Pray that God would save the unbelievers in your life, and pray that He would give you opportunities to speak the gospel to them.

Passage to guide your prayers: 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10

Yourself - Pray prayers of confession, admitting how you have set God aside and disobeyed Him. Pray for the Holy Spirit to help you slow down and pay attention to the glory and goodness of God.

Passage to guide your prayers: Psalm 32:1-5