

THE GOSPEL PROJECT

# UNIT 17

# GOD IN THE RESTORATION



EZRA, ESTHER, ZECHARIAH



#### MEMORY VERSES

“Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout in triumph,  
Daughter Jerusalem! Look, your King is coming to  
you; he is righteous and victorious, humble and  
riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.  
I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the horse  
from Jerusalem. The bow of war will be removed,  
and he will proclaim peace to the nations. His  
dominion will extend from sea to sea, from the  
Euphrates River to the ends of the earth.”

—Zechariah 9:9-10



# THE PEOPLE RESTORED

CORE PASSAGE: EZRA 1:5-8; 3:1-7

## CONTEXT

After decades of disobedience and defeat, God's covenant people were a threadbare bunch. The best and brightest had been deported to Babylon, while the poor, the worn out, and the weak were left behind to work the land for the benefit of another nation. But after seventy years, a new power arrived on the scene to crush Babylon for their excesses, just as the Lord had promised. And King Cyrus of Persia then issued a decree allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple. God's people now held onto a thread of hope that restoration might come to their ragtag remnant.

## KEY CONCEPT

**God is faithful to reconcile and restore His people to Himself.**

As you examine Ezra 1:5-8; 3:1-7:

- Recognize that even through discipline, God desires to restore His people.
- Highlight how King Cyrus recognized God's power and gave Him the praise He deserved.



## TIMELINE

King Nebuchadnezzar Takes  
the First Exiles to Babylon,  
Beginning the 70 Years of  
Exile (2 Kings 24; Daniel 1)

King Evil-Merodach Pardons  
King Jehoiachin of Judah in  
Babylon (2 Kings 25)

King Cyrus Issues Decree  
Allowing the Jews to Return  
to Judah (Ezra 1)

Nebuchadnezzar Destroys  
Jerusalem and the Temple  
(2 Kings 25)

Babylon Is Conquered by  
Medo-Persia (Daniel 5)

**SESSION STUDY:** The First  
Group of Jews Returns,  
Builds the Altar, and Lays the  
Foundation for the Temple  
(Ezra 1-3)

## Daily Readings

☐ **Day 1:** Joel 1:1-3:21

☐ **Day 2:** 2 Chronicles 36:22-23

☐ **Day 3:** Ezra 1:1-11

☐ **Day 4:** Ezra 2:1-70

☐ **Day 5:** Ezra 3:1-13

☐ **Day 6:** Psalm 126



Scan this QR code to access  
this session's Scripture passages.

## GOD WANTS TO RESTORE US BACK INTO RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM (EZRA 1:5-8).

**Underline all the people or groups mentioned in this passage.**

**5** So the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, along with the priests and Levites—everyone whose spirit God had roused—prepared to go up and rebuild the LORD’s house in Jerusalem. **6** All their neighbors supported them with silver articles, gold, goods, livestock, and valuables, in addition to all that was given as a freewill offering. **7** King Cyrus also brought out the articles of the LORD’s house that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem and had placed in the house of his gods. **8** King Cyrus of Persia had them brought out under the supervision of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah.

Not long after creation, the sin of Adam changed everything and messed it all up with dire consequences for his sin. Yet God did not give up on humankind. Instead of starting all over, He initiated a plan of redemption—and God has been pursuing His people ever since. The Old Testament is filled with accounts of this redemptive work. God initiated covenants, instituted laws, provided systems, sent prophets, ordained rulers, and even moved hearts to go rebuild His house, all to pursue and provide for His people.

The author of Ezra clearly recognized God’s providential hand in the Jews’ return to Jerusalem (see Ezra 1:1-4). It often can be difficult to see such things in the moment, but with hindsight and, of course, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the writer saw it clearly that God moved massive mountains to bring His people home.

**LEADER NOTE:** The preceding verses of Ezra 1:1-4 provide context for God’s providential work in the Jews’ restoration. God had foretold their return to the land through the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 29:10-14). God had given Cyrus “all the kingdoms of the earth” and appointed him to rebuild the Lord’s temple (v. 2). God even “roused the spirit” of Cyrus to issue a decree that would allow God’s people to return to Judah as part of His temple restoration plan (v. 1). This massive turn of events must have been beyond their wildest dreams—unless they remembered God’s promises given long ago.

**As you look back, where can you see God’s providential hand at work over your own life?**

### GOSPEL CONNECTION

Though God's people had been exiled, God had a plan for restoration, to bring them back in relationship with Him and back to a place of worship. Many years later, the ultimate restorative work of God is found in Jesus's sacrifice through His crucifixion, allowing forgiveness of sin to restore our relationship with God forever and saving us from death and separation from Him.

From start to finish, the book of Ezra is a testimony of God's faithful work of restoration. God roused hearts, provided goods, returned articles, and more. God is always working, even when it seems all hope is lost.

This is a theme throughout the Old Testament. Just as the Lord worked to deliver His people from Egypt in His perfect timing, we can trust that He works in our lives in the same providential way. Just as He raised up the right ruler to send His people back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, we can wait on His faithful care to lead the movements of our lives. We may not know or understand His timing. We may not like or enjoy His means. But God's work is sure and steadfast because it flows from His good and faithful character.

**LEADER NOTE:** This passage holds many parallels with the exodus account. Both were deliverance events previously promised (see Gen. 15:13-16; Jer. 29:10-14). In His perfect timing, God initiated both by stirring the hearts of pagan kings toward action. Just as in Egypt, God's people in Babylon were released from captivity to enter the land God promised them so that they could worship Him. Here in Ezra, support for the journey and supplies for the temple were provided by the king and their neighbors. In Egypt, the neighboring Egyptians generously gave to the Israelites when asked, and these spoils were later used to build the tabernacle (Ex. 12:35-36; 25:1-8).

**How have you seen God's providential and restorative hand at work through the storyline of the Old Testament?**



## SACRIFICE IS NEEDED AS PART OF OUR RESTORATION WITH GOD (EZRA 3:1-7).

**Circle all the references to offerings to the Lord in this passage.**

**1** When the seventh month arrived, and the Israelites were in their towns, the people gathered as one in Jerusalem. **2** Jeshua son of Jozadak and his brothers the priests along with Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and his brothers began to build the altar of Israel's God in order to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the law of Moses, the man of God. **3** They set up the altar on its foundation and offered burnt offerings for the morning and evening on it to the LORD even though they feared the surrounding peoples. **4** They celebrated the Festival of Shelters as prescribed, and offered burnt offerings each day, based on the number specified by ordinance for each festival day. **5** After that, they offered the regular burnt offering and the offerings for the beginning of each month and for all the LORD's appointed holy occasions, as well as the freewill offerings brought to the LORD. **6** On the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD, even though the foundation of the LORD's temple had not yet been laid. **7** They gave money to the stonecutters and artisans, and gave food, drink, and oil to the people of Sidon and Tyre, so they would bring cedar wood from Lebanon to Joppa by sea, according to the authorization given them by King Cyrus of Persia.

After many months, God's people gathered to continue their process of settling in. No longer chained by the oppression of regimes, they were free to return to their homeland, resettle into ancestral rhythms, and rebuild their central place of worship. Ezra 3 records a major milestone in the history of their big move.

**LEADER NOTE:** "The seventh month" (3:1), Tishri in the Jewish calendar, was a significant one. Tishri, corresponding to our September/October, included celebrations for their new year, the Day of Atonement, and the Festival of Shelters (see Lev. 23:23-36). King Solomon dedicated the original temple at the Festival of Shelters (1 Kings 8:2,65). The timing seen here in Ezra 3 is not coincidental.

It is not an insignificant detail that they started with building the altar. It might have been a temptation to start building walls, ceilings, and corridors. But they started with the altar, "even though the foundation of the Lord's temple had not yet been laid" (3:6). The worship of God demanded sacrifice, and sacrifice required an altar. God's people could not resume worshiping the Lord as He had instituted long ago without an altar.

**Why might the Jews who returned to Jerusalem have been so focused on setting up the altar, offering sacrifices, and celebrating prescribed festivals?**

How easy it is to get sidetracked by what seems the most logical, practical, or economical. But we must follow in the footsteps of our spiritual forefathers and go with what is most worshipful. Through the final sacrifice of Christ, our worship as believers under the new covenant is no longer dependent on a physical altar, but we are still called to worship.

#### THEOLOGY CONNECTION

**CHRIST AS SACRIFICE:** There are several signs, symbols, and pointers in the Old Testament that foreshadowed Christ as being the sacrificial Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world. However, unlike the sacrificial system of the Old Testament, whose sacrifices were unable to take away sin (Heb. 10:4), Christ's sacrifice on the cross was able to permanently, "once and for all," take away sins.

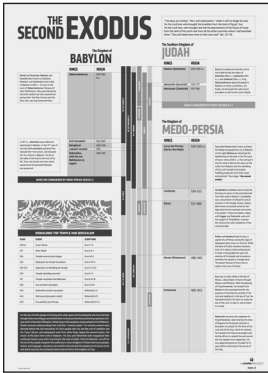
We too are in the middle of a move—a spiritual journey out of bondage into our new life with Christ. However, we do not need to build an altar to worship God. Instead, we must rely on the sufficiency of our Savior's sacrifice and respond to this grace through obedience-filled worship (Rom. 12:1-2).

**What does worship and sacrifice look like today if there is no altar or physical sacrifice?**

**LEADER NOTE:** Though believers in Christ are no longer bound by Old Testament rituals for the right and proper worship of God, we are still called to worship according to His Word. Here are a few highlights to inform our thoughts and practice, based on Romans 12:1. Our worship is to be: (1) intentional, (2) holy, (3) pleasing to God, (4) spiritual, not merely physical, and (5) involving our bodies. Old Testament sacrifices required the entire body of an animal; our worship requires our entire selves.



## Notes



## ARRIVAL

**ENGAGE:** As adults arrive, ask them if they have ever thought something was completely ruined—maybe a favorite shirt that got stained, a plant they were sure was dead, or a sports match they were convinced their team was going to lose—only to see it restored. Ask how it felt to see that thing come back to life again.

## CONTEXT

**SUMMARIZE:** Recall **Pack Item 2: The Second Exodus** and point to the span of time covered by the books of Daniel and Ezra 1–6 to help your group make timeline connections as you provide the context for this session. Say: “The book of Daniel recounts God’s faithfulness to His exiles in Babylon and the beginning of the Persian Empire. The book of Ezra recounts God’s faithfulness in bringing His people back from exile and restoring them to their homeland. This restoration was not just about rebuilding the temple; it was about renewing their worship and devotion to God.”

**TRANSITION:** As we study the Scripture today, we will see how in Ezra 1:5-8, God stirred the hearts of His people to return and provided the resources needed for their restoration. In Ezra 3:1-7, we will see the people’s response—they immediately restored the altar and resumed sacrificial worship, even before rebuilding the temple. Their actions show that spiritual renewal begins with worship and obedience to God.

## RECAP

**LIST:** Lead the group to share their key findings as they were preparing for the session. Ask: “What was encouraging to you? Was there anything confusing or missing you would like to clarify?”

**TRANSITION:** From here, based on the two Scripture passages for our activity, let’s chart out how God’s provision leads to our response.



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### GROUP ACTIVITY

**CHART:** Direct your group to page 58 in their Personal Study Guide (PSG), where they will find a chart titled “God’s Provision and Our Response.” Recreate this chart on a board in your room so you can record the group’s responses.

God’s Provision and Our Response	
Read Ezra 1:5-8; 3:1-7. Record what God provided for the returning exiles and how they responded. Then apply this pattern to yourself.	
WHAT GOD PROVIDED	HOW THE PEOPLE RESPONDED
WHAT GOD PROVIDES FOR ME	HOW I RESPOND

**DIRECT:** Divide the group into two teams. Assign one team Ezra 1:5-8 and the other Ezra 3:1-7. Guide each team to read their passage and identify key ways God provided for His people’s restoration to the land (*stirring the people’s hearts [1:5]; providing resources through their neighbors [1:6]; King Cyrus ensuring the return of articles for the temple [1:7-8]*) or the people’s response (*their willingness to gather [3:1]; rebuilding the altar, offering sacrifices, and committing to worship despite opposition [3:3]*). After a few minutes, bring the teams together to discuss their findings. Encourage the group to fill out the chart in their PSG as you fill out the chart on the board.

**DISCUSS:** How does this pattern of God’s provision and human response apply to our own spiritual restoration through Jesus Christ?

**ENGAGE:** Invite groups of 3-4 to discuss and record personally what God has done in their own lives and how they can follow the example of Ezra and the Israelites in their response. After a few minutes, invite volunteers to share their experiences while you summarize them for the chart on the board.

**SAY:** God initiates restoration, but His people must respond in faith and obedience. In Ezra, this meant rebuilding the altar and offering sacrifices even before laying the temple's foundation. The temple had been the dwelling place of God, where His presence rested among His people. But even in their unhoused worship, the Lord was reconciling them with Himself.

### DEBRIEF

**(PSG p. 58) What do these passages reveal about God's desire for restoration?**

**How do you see this pattern in your own life: God providing and calling you to respond?**

### SUMMARIZE

The Jews who returned from exile began to restore their worship of the Lord with the prescribed sacrifices on the altar of the temple. But now, through Christ's perfect sacrifice, God's people have direct access to God. Christ did what no man could. Jesus presented the most perfect sacrifice once for all—Himself. Therefore, believers are not just visitors in His presence; we are His dwelling place. The Holy Spirit lives in us, shaping us, refining us, reconciling us, and making us more like Jesus. Today, our response to God's restoration includes faith in Christ's ultimate sacrifice and daily worship of Him through our lives.

### HEAD, HEART, HANDS

Walk the group through the Head, Heart, Hands section in the PSG (p. 59). If running short on time, specifically highlight the **Hands** section in this week's study, inviting volunteers to share their responses to the question in this section.



**HEAD:** When things are hard, it's easy to start thinking God has forgotten us, or worse, abandoned us. This is especially true when we know we've messed up. But if we are in Christ by faith, then we are forever tethered to God's grace. We can know and trust and hold onto the fact that God is always working to reconcile us to Himself and make all things good and right and just as they should be, regardless of what we can see and reason on our own.

**What keeps you from trusting that God is for you and not against you?**



**HEART:** God's people seemed to be laser-focused on getting the "right" job done. Instead of giving in to overplanning and performative busy work, they committed themselves to radical obedience and a spiritual strategy over all else. This approach revealed their heart to draw near to God through the clear way He had laid out in His Word. God isn't ambiguous in what He desires. His people knew the requirements and followed them completely.

**What do you need to focus on in order to worship God with all your heart?**



**HANDS:** Though we are no longer required to perform ritual sacrifices to appease God's wrath for sin, we are called to an active life of sacrifice. The Bible is filled with clear and universal callings on our lives, geared toward our holiness as image-bearers of God. By faith, we can live a life of continual sacrifice, fueled by the desire to worship the God who has rescued us from bondage to sin.

**What can you do this week to worship God as a living sacrifice?**

### NEXT STEPS

Challenge the group to consider these actions as responses to this week's session.

- Reflect on an area in your life where you need restoration. Pray for God's provision and seek His guidance.
- Take an intentional step of obedience this week. Be proactive: write it down as a note on your phone and share your intentions with a godly friend for accountability. Respond to God's call for restoration.
- Encourage someone in their search for restoration. Just as God used leaders and the community in their return from exile, look for ways to support someone with biblical truth in their need for reconciliation and restoration.

Invite volunteers to share prayer needs for this week. Encourage them to record these in the space on page 59 in their PSG so they can pray for others throughout the week.

### PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES

### PRAYING SCRIPTURE

**CLOSE:** Pray through Psalm 126:1-3 with your group, praying for opportunities for your group to share with others about the greatness of His gospel for the salvation of every sinner who believes in Jesus.

Notes

# THE PERSIAN EMPIRE

Adapted from an article by Kelvin Moore



The Persian Empire ranks among the great empires of the world with the Egyptian, Assyrian, and Babylonian Empires. The books of 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Esther, Ezekiel, and Daniel make reference to the Persian Empire. Most readers of the Old Testament recognize the names of Persian kings such as Darius, Artaxerxes, and especially Cyrus. But what do we know about the Persian Empire?

## PERSIA'S RISE AND FALL

Originally, the ancient world knew Persia as “Fars” (also spelled “Pars”) or “Faristan,” a name derived from the chief province. Historians assume the Persians originated from central Asia around 1000 BC, about the time David solidified his reign over Israel. After the Elamite culture collapsed in 1050 BC, several groups entered the region. From these groups, the Persian Empire evolved. In the Old Testament world, Persia referred to a country laying to the east of modern-day Iraq in the region of Iran. At the height of power, Persia included territories currently found in Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Syria, Türkiye, Russia, Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

Generally speaking, the Persian Empire began with the victories of Cyrus II over Babylon in 539 BC and ended with defeats to the Greeks under Alexander the Great (356–323 BC). The Babylonian Empire began to decay after the death of Nebuchadnezzar (605–562 BC). Cyrus recognized Babylon's weaknesses and instability and decided to attack. Daniel's account of the handwriting on the wall (Dan. 5) tells of the night Cyrus's army entered Babylon and killed King Belshazzar. Cyrus's conquering of Babylon in 539 BC raised Persia to the position of a world empire. Persia, now powerful and expansive, encompassed the entire Near East.

Ultimately, the Greek army under Alexander the Great conquered the entire Persian Empire in 332 BC, ushering in the Hellenistic age.

## PERSIA'S RULERS AND RELIGIONS

While kings were not regarded as gods, the Persians viewed their kings as earthly lieutenants of the deities of the empire. Many of these kings possessed notable administrative skills. Persian kings developed the most organized empire the world had ever witnessed. Cyrus II (559–530 BC) divided the empire into twenty large districts known as “satrapies,” each ruled by a satrap. Kings normally appointed satraps, who were directly responsible to the king himself, from Persian or Median nobles. Satraps, then, ordinarily appointed native officers: Jews in Judah, Samaritans in Samaria, and Arabs in the South. Daniel 6:1-3 lists Daniel as a native officer under Darius and calls him an “administrator.” Additionally, Persian kings divided satrapies into provinces, each having their own administrative organizations and small military garrisons. The Persians committed themselves to rule by law. But the kings did not impose an imperial law. Instead, the Persian kings gave support and authority to local law and its enforcement.

Persian religion remains mystifying and passionately debated. Early Persians revered gods of nature, fertility, and the heavens. Some believe that the religious leader Zoroaster lived in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC and influenced Persian belief. Zoroaster proclaimed a religion based on the principle “do good, hate evil.” For Zoroaster, the good god Ahura-Mazda, represented by fire and water, stood opposite to a dark power of evil. Other historians deny the widespread influence of Zoroaster.

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## PERSIA AND THE BIBLE

The Old Testament records numerous points of interaction between the Persians and Hebrews. Isaiah 44:28–45:1 records an early reference to King Cyrus II, the Great. In contrast to the Assyrians and Babylonians, Cyrus adopted a much more lenient policy toward his captives. Cyrus allowed exiled Jews to return to their native land and rebuild their homes. Cyrus encouraged the returning Jews to rebuild their place of worship:

The LORD, the God of the heavens, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and has appointed me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of his people among you, may his God be with him, and may he go to Jerusalem in Judah and build the house of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem. (Ezra 1:2-3)

Additionally, Cyrus generously authorized the Hebrews to draw funds from the imperial treasury to finance temple reconstruction (6:8). Cyrus's humanitarian policy gained him the good will of almost all the ancient world—so much so, in fact, that Isaiah hailed Cyrus as God's "shepherd" (Isa. 44:28). According to Isaiah, Cyrus was God's chosen instrument to deliver the Hebrews (45:1).

After Cyrus's decree, the returning Jews managed to lay the temple's foundation. But due to opposition, work ceased for the next fifteen to sixteen years. Encouraged by the minor prophets Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5), the Jews again began work on the temple during the reign of Darius I ("the Great," 522–486 BC). Unaware of Cyrus's edict, the governor of Jerusalem's province west of the Euphrates attempted to delay the reconstruction in 520 BC. He sent a letter to the satrap requesting

an inquiry as to Jewish authorization to rebuild the temple. The ensuing search found nothing in the archives of Babylon. Further examination in Ecbatana, Cyrus's residence during his first year, uncovered the decree. Ezra 6 records that Darius I verified Cyrus's declaration and allowed work on the temple to resume. Ezra dated the completion of the temple "on the third day of the month of Adar in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius" (Ezra 6:15).

The book of Esther records the crisis and subsequent miraculous deliverance that took place during the reign of King Ahasuerus (Esth. 1:1-2). After dismissing his queen, Vashti, a search throughout the kingdom led King Ahasuerus to marry Esther, who was a Jew. Most likely, Ahasuerus, Hebrew for Xerxes, referred to Xerxes I (486–465 BC).

Ezekiel named Persia among the armies of Tyre (Ezek. 27:10) and as an ally of God in the invasion against Israel (38:5). The prophet Daniel recorded numerous references to Persia (Dan. 8:20; 10:1; 11:2). Elsewhere, Nehemiah's efforts to rebuild Jerusalem's wall date to the reign of Persian King Artaxerxes I Longimanus (about 465–424 BC). Nehemiah requested permission to return to Jerusalem to rebuild its wall "in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes" (Neh. 2:1). Artaxerxes I Longimanus's twentieth year dates 445 BC. History offers no information about relations between Persian kings and Jews after the time of Nehemiah.

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