

MANual Lessons from Ezra

Our next lesson from The MANual comes from the book of Ezra. Most discussions about biblical heroes likely do not include Ezra, but probably should. He was a humble, obedient man who served God and taught about God's faithfulness.

About the Book of Ezra

The ten chapters of Ezra in this NIV (New International Version) Bible are about how God can restore broken remnants. Similar to the lessons from the prophet Samuel, the lessons of Kings, and lessons from the Chronicler, Ezra is another of the historical books of the Old Testament that explains how God restored the Israelites whenever they kept His commandments. But the account of Ezra shows how one man can make a difference.

The setting is around 538-450 B.C.; approximately 48 years after King Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem and sent the Israelites to Babylon as captives. Nebuchadnezzar has died in 562 when King Cyrus of Persia overthrew his successors. Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem in 539 and gave them back more than 5,400 Temple artifacts of gold and silver stolen by Nebuchadnezzar in hopes of winning their approval. Cyrus showed them great mercy since he needed a buffer zone between his kingdom and the northern Assyrians.



Men of God: About Ezra

Ezra was a scribe, priest, and great leader. His name means

“help,” since he dedicated his whole life to serving God and serving God’s people. Ezra is the presumed author of 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Psalm 119. It’s interesting to note that the author switches from writing in the third person to the first person once Ezra appears on the scene in chapter 7, which lends credibility to him as the author. Tradition also says Ezra later led a council of 120 men who compiled the Old Testament canon, the authoritative scripture texts of the Jewish and Christian religious communities.

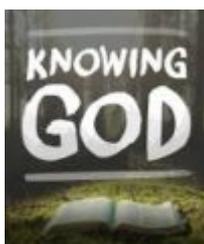
- Make a list of the heroes you know of in the Bible. Did it include Ezra?
 - Now, make a list of secular heroes in today’s world. Compare the characteristics of the people on the two lists.
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The Exiles Return

Chapter 2 lists the first set of exiles led by Zerubbabel, a descendant of David. It included people from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, grouped by families and cities. Priests, Levites, and 392 Temple servants also returned. As we saw in Chronicles, genealogy is very important, so Ezra provides a detailed list of those returning. If someone could not prove they descended from Abraham; they were not considered true Jews and excluded from full participation in Jewish community life. In total, 42,360 people returned to Judah in addition to 7,337 servants, and 200 singers; both men and women.

Ezra chapter 3 describes the rebuilding period. Upon the Israelites’ return from captivity, the leaders of each tribe and family voluntarily gave as much as they could toward the reconstruction of the Temple. They were enthusiastic and sincere givers even though they knew they could not match the magnitude of Solomon’s Temple.

First, the Jews constructed an Altar to God to symbolize God's presence and protection. Then, Zerubbabel sacrificed burnt offerings according to the Laws of Moses to show their rededication to God. They celebrated the Feast of Shelters (also called the Feast of Tabernacles) as a reminder of their temporary dwellings of their ancestor's journey for hundreds of years in the wilderness.



He Works in Surprising Ways

Most of us have a tendency to give up too easily. We get tired, frustrated, and convinced that there is no way God can work in our life. But God never gives up on His people. It's often when things seem most bleak that He works miracles or brings about the biggest change in us. A case in point is the exiles as King Cyrus allows the people to return to their land.

- What current circumstances have you asking, "God, where are you in my life?"
- How can you rededicate yourself to trusting in God's presence and protection

After the altar, the Israelites began reconstructing the Temple according to the previous instructions during the time of King David. Chapter 4 describes that opposition arises from the local inhabitants and a campaign of accusations and rumors temporarily halts the project. Further opposition comes from Xerxes, a mighty pagan king, and his son, Artaxerxes, who feared the rebuilding of a huge empire similar to Solomon's.

The construction resumes in chapters 5 and 6 after the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah remind the kings of God's commandment to rebuild. The Temple is completed and dedicated in 515 B.C., just in time for the annual Passover celebration of the Israelites' deliverance from Egypt.

The Ministry of Ezra

Here is where Ezra details his journey in the first-person. Chapters 7 and 8 describe Ezra leading the second wave of exiles some 80 years after Zerubbabel brought the first group. He again lists the leaders who traveled in this wave. He also lists the objects and treasures brought back, accounting for everything by number and weight. Ezra was a good steward of everything God entrusted to him for the journey.



Our Stewardship

Today's materialistic society tells us joy comes from a new car, a better TV, or a bigger house. These things make us superficially happy for a while, but deep, lasting joy is a blessing that only comes from God. He fills us with joy and blesses our work so we're effective in our career or ministry. His joy comes as we honor Him with our time, talents, and treasures. His lasting joy when we worship God before anything else and serve others. As Jesus said, "You can not serve both God and money" (Matthew 6:24).

- If God does not need our money, why does He want us to give cheerfully?
- What does our use of resources reveal about what we are passionate about?
- What keeps us from putting God before our material

possessions?

Ezra arrives to find the people's lives and the rebuilt Temple, now 58 years old, in shambles. King Artaxerxes decrees the people are to give Ezra everything he needs to beautify the Temple and to teach God's laws. But intermarriage with foreigners opposed to God threatened the spiritual future of the nation.

Chapter 9 opens with Ezra's prayer concerning intermarriage. His concern was not racial prejudice, but about the people adhering to laws about marrying for spiritual reasons. God did not want the Israelites to marry pagan women since He knew they would fall for their spouse's idolatry instead of remaining obedient to God about something as important as marriage.

MYTHS
BUSTED

The Woman at Work is More Exciting than My Wife

Ever since the time of Judges, there is a history of men sinning both within and outside of their marriages. If you are married, chances are you struggled with the "grass-is-greener" aspect of opposite-sex attractions. There's a new, attractive co-worker at work who confides in you a lot. You are worried about the effects your feelings toward her that may have on your marriage. You sense you are leaning toward an emotional affair that could become something physical. Here are some suggestions to avoid allowing your heart to fall for some pagan practices

- Mention your wife often in conversations with members of the opposite sex.

- Never complain about your wife to another woman.
 - Display a picture of your wife on your desk at work.
 - Avoid closed-door meetings with female co-workers. Avoid physical contact at all times.
 - Keep coworkers out of your hotel rooms when on the road. Stay out of theirs too.
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After hearing about the sins of the people, Ezra wept, tore his clothes (a common practice to express sorrow for sin in those days), and fell to his knees in prayer. Seeing this, the people confessed their sins and asked for direction in restoring their relationship with God. Ezra told the men to send their foreign wives and children away to ensure no more pagans would inherit Israel's land.



God Buddy Focus

Ezra was a man of God and a true hero for Israel and a fitting role model for us today. He demonstrates that a personal commitment to living for God is more important than trying to keep track of our successes. Ezra shows us that being a good steward is how we serve God and serve others. He reminds us that God promised to not turn His back on us, even if our lives are scarred by sin and rebellion. No matter how long we have been away, Ezra encourages us to rebuild and rededicate our lives to Him.

This week:

1. Review the list of biblical and secular heroes. Did God make the list? If so, why? If not, Why not?
2. Are you a good steward of the people and possessions

entrusted to you? Do you take good care of those, as Ezra did with the people and treasures God entrusted to him?

3. Ask your God Buddy to help you through any temptations with women at work.

The next lesson comes from another historical writing by Ezra in the Old Testament, the book of Nehemiah.