

# ADULT BIBLE STUDY GUIDE

## *Ezra, Haggai, Zechariah, Nehemiah, Malachi*

RESTORING THE FUTURE

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**BAPTISTWAYPRESS®**

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*Ezra, Haggai, Zechariah, Nehemiah, Malachi:  
Restoring the Future—Adult Bible Study Guide*

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## *How to Make the Best Use of This Issue*

Whether you're the teacher or a student—

1. Start early in the week before your class meets.
2. Overview the study. Review the table of contents and read the study introduction. Try to see how each lesson relates to the overall study.
3. Use your Bible to read and consider prayerfully the Scripture passages for the lesson. (You'll see that each writer has chosen a favorite translation for the lessons in this issue. You're free to use the Bible translation you prefer and compare it with the translation chosen for that unit, of course.)
4. After reading all the Scripture passages in your Bible, then read the writer's comments. The comments are intended to be an aid to your study of the Bible.
5. Read the small articles—"sidebars"—in each lesson. They are intended to provide additional, enrichment information and inspiration and to encourage thought and application.
6. Try to answer for yourself the questions included in each lesson. They're intended to encourage further thought and application, and they can also be used in the class session itself.

If you're the teacher—

- A. Do all of the things just mentioned, of course. As you begin the study with your class, be sure to find a way to help your class know the date on which each lesson will be studied. You might do this in one or more of the following ways:
  - In the first session of the study, briefly overview the study by identifying with your class the date on which each lesson will be studied. Lead your class to write the date in the table of contents on page 7 and on the first page of each lesson. **Note:** An Easter lesson is included for classes or groups using these materials during the Easter season. If your class uses the Easter lesson, you

may need to decide how to study the other lessons, such as by combining two lessons or studying the missed lesson at a special class meeting.

- Make and post a chart that indicates the date on which each lesson will be studied.
  - If all of your class has e-mail, send them an e-mail with the dates the lessons will be studied.
  - Provide a bookmark with the lesson dates. You may want to include information about your church and then use the bookmark as an outreach tool, too. A model for a bookmark can be downloaded from [www.baptistwaypress.org](http://www.baptistwaypress.org) on the Resources for Adults page.
  - Develop a sticker with the lesson dates, and place it on the table of contents or on the back cover.
- B. Get a copy of the *Teaching Guide*, a companion piece to this *Study Guide*. The *Teaching Guide* contains additional Bible comments plus two teaching plans. The teaching plans in the *Teaching Guide* are intended to provide practical, easy-to-use teaching suggestions that will work in your class.
- C. After you've studied the Bible passage, the lesson comments, and other material, use the teaching suggestions in the *Teaching Guide* to help you develop your plan for leading your class in studying each lesson.
- D. You may want to get the additional adult Bible study comments—*Adult Online Bible Commentary*—by Dr. Jim Denison, pastor of Park Cities Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas, that are available at [www.baptistwaypress.org](http://www.baptistwaypress.org) and can be downloaded free. An additional teaching plan plus teaching resource items are also available at [www.baptistwaypress.org](http://www.baptistwaypress.org).
- E. You also may want to get the enrichment teaching help that is provided on the internet by the *Baptist Standard* at [www.baptiststandard.com](http://www.baptiststandard.com). (Other class participants may find this information helpful, too.) Call 214-630-4571 to begin your subscription to the printed edition of the *Baptist Standard*.
- F. Enjoy leading your class in discovering the meaning of the Scripture passages and in applying these passages to their lives.

## *Writers of This Study Guide*

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## Introducing

### EZRA, HAGGAI, ZECHARIAH, NEHEMIAH, MALACHI: *Restoring the Future*

#### Restoring the Future?

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*Restoring the future?* Don't we generally think and speak of *restoring the past*? Of course, but in the case of the exiles returning to Judah after their enforced sojourn in Babylon, *restoring the future* fits as well, maybe better. The future of Israel had been seemingly destroyed in 587 B.C. That was when Babylon conquered Judah; destroyed Jerusalem and the temple; killed many people, including Judah's king; and carted off many others to exile in Babylon. See 2 Kings 25:1–30 and 2 Chronicles 36:1–21 for the details of the tragedy.<sup>1</sup> At that point, the future for Judah seemed grim.

Then Judah's situation changed. Persia conquered Babylon, and Cyrus, Persia's king, brought a new approach to dealing with conquered peoples. Beginning in 539 B.C., Cyrus's approach was to allow the exiles from the various conquered territories to return to their lands. Shortly afterward, in 538 B.C., some of Judah's exiles began to do just that.

So, with the return of some of the exiles, Judah had an opportunity to make a fresh start—to restore their future. But would they? Too, what kind of fresh start would they make, and what kind of future would they restore?

The five books of this study—Ezra, Haggai, Zechariah, Nehemiah, and Malachi—deal in various ways with these questions. They deal with matters like restoring the nation's worship in the temple (Ezra, Haggai,

Zechariah, and to an extent Nehemiah and Malachi), rebuilding the city wall (Nehemiah), and calling the people to live in faithfulness to God's covenant (all of the books).

### What Time Is It?

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All of these books—Ezra, Haggai, Zechariah, Nehemiah, and Malachi—are generally considered to fit within the century or so after 539 B.C. Except for one—Haggai—and at least the first portion of another—Zechariah—how they fit in this time period and in relation to one another is a subject of much discussion.

It is easy to see what time it was for Haggai. The Book of Haggai dates itself specifically; it takes place in 520 B.C. Indeed, the book consists mainly of sermons given on three different days (Haggai 1:1; 2:1; 2:10). If we used our system of dating, the dates would be August 29, October 17, and December 18.

Chapters 1 and 7 of Zechariah also include dates (Zechariah 1:1, 7; 7:1). These dates indicate that the events of Zechariah, especially Zechariah 1—8, were contemporary with Haggai, occurring in 520 B.C. and 518 B.C.

Excellent Bible scholars have varying opinions about how Ezra and Nehemiah were related to each other, though, and to the time period. The traditional view is that Ezra and Nehemiah ministered around the middle of the fifth century B.C., with Ezra preceding Nehemiah.

Exactly how Malachi fits in relation to this time is also uncertain. What is certain, though, is that all of these books deal with the time after Judah's return as the nation sought in various ways to restore its future.

Use the chart, "Chronological Sketch of the Events in Ezra, Haggai, Zechariah, Nehemiah, Malachi," to help you identify when each lesson in this study likely occurs.

### Applying the Message(s)

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Even though we do not know for certain all we might like to know of the historical context of these books, they still have much to teach us (see Romans 15:4). As we study, we will focus on Ezra's message about "Starting Over"; on Haggai's "Challenge to Rebuild" and thus to restore

the worship of God in the temple; on Zechariah’s support of Haggai’s concern with an emphasis on God’s promise to restore; on Nehemiah’s practical example of a spiritual leader “Getting Things Done”; and on Malachi’s fiery “Questions and Answers,” giving a prophetic call to live in faithfulness to the God of the covenant and thus *restore the future*.

One more thing to keep in mind—as we study these books under the title of “Restoring the Future,” likely we should put a question mark after that title. The reality is that the people of that day did *not* restore the future—partially perhaps, but certainly not fully. That’s why we have the New Testament.

*Note:* Since Easter occurs during the time of the first release of this study, an Easter lesson is provided.

UNIT ONE, EZRA: STARTING OVER

Lesson 1	Making a Fresh Start	Ezra 1
Lesson 2	Laying the Foundations for Worship	Ezra 3:1–7, 10–13

UNIT TWO, HAGGAI: A CHALLENGE TO REBUILD

Lesson 3	Put Priority on God’s Work	Haggai 1:1–11; 2:1–9
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UNIT THREE, ZECHARIAH: GOD’S PROMISE TO RESTORE

Lesson 4	God’s Gracious Offer	Zechariah 1:1–17
Lesson 5	Ten Encouraging Words	Zechariah 8

UNIT FOUR, NEHEMIAH: GETTING THINGS DONE

Lesson 6	Start from a Spiritual Perspective	Nehemiah 1
Lesson 7	Plan Carefully and Take Action	Nehemiah 2
Lesson 8	Don’t Let the Critics Get You Down	Nehemiah 3:1–12; 4:1–6
Lesson 9	Act with Integrity	Nehemiah 5
Lesson 10	Focus on God’s Teachings	Nehemiah 7:73b; 8:1–4a, 9–18
Lesson 11	Give Thanks to God	Nehemiah 12:27–43

UNIT FIVE, MALACHI: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Lesson 12	What’s Wrong with Our Religion, Anyway?	Malachi 1:6–14; 2:4–9
Lesson 13	Does God Really Bring Judgment?	Malachi 2:17—3:5
Lesson 14	Why Do We Need to Repent?	Malachi 3:6–12

### Additional Resources for Studying the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah<sup>2</sup>

- Joseph Blenkinsopp. *Ezra-Nehemiah. A Commentary.* The Old Testament Library. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1988.
- James Montgomery Boice. *Nehemiah. Learning to Lead.* Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1990.
- Emmett Willard Hamrick. "Ezra—Nehemiah." *The Broadman Bible Commentary.* Volume 3. Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1970.
- Frederick Carlson Holmgren. *Israel Alive Again.* International Theological Commentary. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1987.
- Derek Kidner. *Ezra and Nehemiah.* Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. Leicester, England: Intervarsity Press, 1979.
- Ralph W. Klein. "The Books of Ezra & Nehemiah." *The New Interpreter's Bible.* Volume III. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999.
- Charles R. Swindoll. *Hand Me Another Brick.* New York: Bantam Books, 1978.
- Mark A. Throntveit. *Ezra and Nehemiah.* Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1992.
- H. G. M. Williamson. *Ezra-Nehemiah.* Word Biblical Commentary. Volume 16. Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985.

### Additional Resources for Studying the Books of Haggai and Zechariah

- Mark J. Boda. *Haggai, Zechariah.* The NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004.
- W. Eugene March. "Haggai." *The New Interpreter's Bible.* Volume VII. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.
- Ben C. Ollenburger. "Zechariah." *The New Interpreter's Bible.* Volume VII. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.
- Paul L. Redditt. *Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.* New Century Bible Commentary. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1994.
- David A. Smith. "Haggai." *The Broadman Bible Commentary.* Volume 7. Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1972.
- Ralph L. Smith. "Haggai." *Word Biblical Commentary.* Volume 32. Waco, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1984.
- John D. W. Watts. "Zechariah." *The Broadman Bible Commentary.* Volume 7. Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1972.

### Additional Resources for Studying the Book of Malachi

- David W. Baker. *Joel, Obadiah, Malachi*. The NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006.
- T. Miles Bennett. "Malachi." *The Broadman Bible Commentary*. Volume 7. Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1972.
- Page H. Kelley. *Malachi: Rekindling the Fires of Faith*. Nashville, Tennessee: Convention Press, 1986.
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- Taylor, Richard A. and E. Ray Clendenen. *Haggai, Malachi*. The New American Commentary. Vol. 21A. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2004.
- Pieter A. Verhoff. *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987.

### NOTES

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1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in "Introducing Ezra, Haggai, Zechariah, Nehemiah, Malachi: Restoring the Future" are from the New Revised Standard Version.
2. Listing a book does not imply full agreement by the writers or BAPTISTWAY PRESS® with all of its comments.



# Chronological Sketch of the Events in Ezra, Haggai, Zechariah, Nehemiah, Malachi

Time	Event	Scripture lessons in this general timeframe <sup>1</sup>
587–586 B.C.	Babylonians defeat Judah, destroy Jerusalem, and take people into exile in Babylon	
539 B.C.	Cyrus the Great of Persia conquers Babylon; begins to allow conquered peoples to return to their lands	
538 B.C.	First return of groups of Jews, led by Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel	Lesson One. Ezra 1
537 B.C.	Re-establishment of temple worship begun; foundations for the temple laid	Lesson Two. Ezra 3:1–7, 10–13
520 B.C.	Haggai preaches about urgent need to rebuild the temple	Lesson Three. Haggai 1:1–11; 2:1–9
520–518 B.C.	Zechariah encourages the people to rebuild the temple.	Lesson Four. Zechariah 1:1–17 Lesson Five. Zechariah 8
516 B.C.	Temple is completed and dedicated	
480 B.C.?	Malachi? (See next page.)	
458 B.C.	Ezra the scribe arrives in Jerusalem	

Time	Event	Scripture lessons in this general timeframe <sup>1</sup>
445–430 B.C.	Events in the Book of Nehemiah occur	Lesson Six. Nehemiah 1 Lesson Seven. Nehemiah 2 Lesson Eight. Nehemiah 3:1–12; 4:1–6 Lesson Nine. Nehemiah 5:1–19 Lesson Ten. Nehemiah 7:73b; 8:1–4a, 9–18 Lesson Eleven. Nehemiah 12:27–43
	Malachi’s preaching occurs, possibly in 480 B.C., before Ezra’s revival and the events in the Book of Nehemiah; could be later, after the events of the Book of Nehemiah; date uncertain	Lesson Twelve. Malachi 1:6–14; 2:4–9 Lesson Thirteen. Malachi 2:17—3:5 Lesson Fourteen. Malachi 3:6–12

NOTES

1. Relation of Scripture lessons to events and timeframes is approximate. The information is intended simply to give guidance to the study. Bible scholars have varying opinions about the chronology of this period.



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## UNIT ONE

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# Ezra: Starting Over

The story of the Hebrew people contains many significant events around which their history revolves. The Babylonian invasion that resulted in the exile of the people of Judah and the destruction of Solomon's temple around 587 B.C. was one such event. These events are described briefly in 2 Chronicles 36:15–20, and more graphically in Jeremiah 39—45.

Some fifty years later, the fall of Babylon to Cyrus and his Persian Empire in 539 B.C. led to a decree giving the Jews the opportunity to return home and rebuild their temple. This event likely seemed to most in the Persian Empire to be a small and insignificant thing. To send a few thousand Judeans back to their homeland to practice their religious life would have fit the pattern Cyrus practiced with other captive people, perhaps as a simple strategy to prevent unrest and insurgency. To the Jewish people, however, it became a momentous experience, repeated in story and written into their history as evidence of the providential care of God. The return that Cyrus permitted was one of at least two major moves of the people of Judah back to Jerusalem.

With the dedication of the rebuilt temple in 516 B.C., a new chapter in Judah's history was begun. Fifty to sixty years after the temple dedication, another Persian king permitted the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. Information about this event is found in the Book of Nehemiah.

The Old Testament Books of Ezra and Nehemiah are considered by many scholars to have originally been one work. They portray a continuing story of Judah's return and rebuilding, which were pivotal moments in Hebrew history. The two lessons in this unit deal with Scripture passages in the Book of Ezra that focus on Judah's return from exile and the rebuilding of the temple.<sup>1</sup>

UNIT ONE, EZRA: STARTING OVER

Lesson 1	Making a Fresh Start	Ezra 1
Lesson 2	Laying the Foundations for Worship	Ezra 3:1–7, 10–13

NOTES \_\_\_\_\_

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture translations in unit one, lessons one and two, are from the New Revised Standard Version.

# LESSON ONE

## *Making a Fresh Start*

### FOCAL TEXT

Ezra 1

### BACKGROUND

Ezra 1

### MAIN IDEA

God graciously provides the opportunity to make a fresh start in the midst of desperate and difficult situations people bring on themselves.

### QUESTION TO EXPLORE

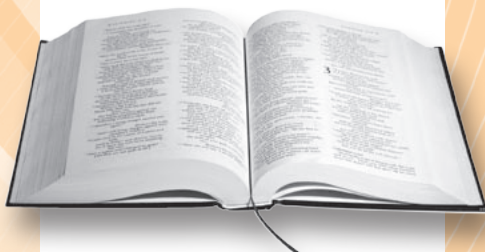
What fresh start is needed today?

### STUDY AIM

To explain how the events of Judah's return represented a fresh start and to suggest what they teach us about God's offer of a fresh start today

### QUICK READ

In the darkest of times, God's providential work offers hope for a new beginning in keeping with his promises.



My wife and I recently worked in a service project in New Orleans, two years after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. We saw people and listened to their stories of displacement and return after the storm. We heard the despair so many felt after the storm had destroyed their homes, jobs, and communities. Even so, there was a sense of hope for those who were able to return and begin the process of rebuilding.

Think of other times in life when people find themselves in need of a fresh start. There are illnesses that leave us physically in need of rehabilitation. The loss of loved ones leaves us emotionally empty and in need of healing. In recent times many have experienced the loss of jobs in which they had invested years of training and effort, and the result is often nothing short of depression. Even moving to a new city, resulting in the loss of old friends and familiar neighborhoods, can leave us groping for something to cling to as we make a new beginning.

One of the great hopes for all of us lies in the fact that life so often gives us the opportunity to start over. Who among us can deny that having a second chance has allowed us to reach some degree of success in one of the ventures of our living? The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah provide us a portrait of a time when the people of Judah received a great opportunity for being reestablished as a special people of God.

Today's lesson gives us a glimpse of God's faithfulness in keeping his promises of a new beginning in Jerusalem after destruction and exile several decades earlier.

## EZRA 1

<sup>1</sup>In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom, and also in a written edict declared:

<sup>2</sup>"Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. <sup>3</sup>Any of those among you who are of his people—may their God be with them!—are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem;

<sup>4</sup>and let all survivors, in whatever place they reside, be assisted by the people of their place with silver and gold, with goods and with animals, besides freewill offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem."

<sup>5</sup>The heads of the families of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites—everyone whose spirit God had stirred—got ready to go up and rebuild the house of the Lord in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup>All their neighbors aided them with silver vessels, with gold, with goods, with animals, and with valuable gifts, besides all that was freely offered. <sup>7</sup>King Cyrus himself brought out the vessels of the house of the Lord that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods. <sup>8</sup>King Cyrus of Persia had them released into the charge of Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah. <sup>9</sup>And this was the inventory: gold basins, thirty; silver basins, one thousand; knives, twenty-nine; <sup>10</sup>gold bowls, thirty; other silver bowls, four hundred ten; other vessels, one thousand; <sup>11</sup>the total of the gold and silver vessels was five thousand four hundred. All these Sheshbazzar brought up, when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem.

### **A People in Need of a Fresh Start (1:1–4)**

The backdrop of today's lesson finds the people of Judah (Jerusalem and the old Southern kingdom) living in exile in Babylon following their defeat at the hand of Nebuchadnezzar's army. With the fall of Jerusalem around 586 B.C., the city walls and Solomon's temple were destroyed, and many of the people of Judah were taken into exile. There followed decades in which the people were instructed to settle in Babylon and await the fulfillment of God's promised deliverance (see Jeremiah 29:1–14).

Epic stories in literature serve to help a people understand more clearly who they are, what values they possess, and where those values originated. In the Old Testament literature the record of Israel's life

journey serves as an epic portrayal of God's hand at work in the lives of his people. The Books of 1 and 2 Chronicles offer a sweeping overview of divine providence, frail human ups and downs, and the hope of a gracious and merciful God.

The Book of Ezra begins where 2 Chronicles ends. Scholars differ on whether 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah might have at one time been a single effort to bring together a historical narrative. Recent scholarship tends to see them as more separate writings, but their messages flow as a reflection of the fall of Judah, the exile to Babylon, and a return to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and its temple.

Cyrus of Persia had conquered Babylon. His way of dealing with conquered peoples was different from that of Babylon. Rather than keep them in exile, he would permit them to return to their lands. The author quotes in Ezra 1:2–4 the decree of Cyrus to allow the return of the people who wished to go back to Jerusalem. This is the first of several official decrees recorded in Ezra. These statements are similar in form to the common documents found outside the Bible in the Persian period of history.

The return of the exiles would take place in at least two major moves. No doubt smaller groups of people made their way back to the homeland, but Ezra 1 shows the first movement, while chapter 7 shows the

## THE TEMPLE VESSELS

Conquering armies in ancient history often carried away the symbols of the gods of defeated nations. These would be displayed in the places of worship of the conquerors as a sign of victory over the other gods. They were trophies of battles won. In the case of the Jews, who had no images of God, the valuable items used in the temple were taken (2 Kings 24:13). Considerable detail is given in the text of our lesson to the items returned. Compare this list to the description of the temple furnishings in 1 Kings 7:13–40.

The significance of the return of the temple vessels was not simply in their monetary value. They represented the return of items used in the worship of God, representing the respect and reverence of the people who were beginning their life anew as a special people of God.

arrival of Ezra and others to complete the work started earlier. (See the chart, “Chronological Sketch of the Events in Ezra, Haggai, Zechariah, Nehemiah, Malachi,” on page 15.)

### **The Challenge of Obedience (1:5)**

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Our family has lived on the East Coast for many decades, but we have often traveled west across the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina and Virginia. We rode in comfortable automobiles along paved roads carved through the rugged mountains with scarcely a pause or inconvenience. My wife’s grandmother, however, often told us of her parents’ journey across these mountains more than a century and a half ago in wagons and on horseback. They had to rely on crude markers and uncharted paths of the Native Americans and frontier pioneers. They did this in search of making a fresh start in the undeveloped lands to the west. The fact that so many made that journey is a testament to the resolve of the human spirit.

We see that same spirit in this opening chapter of the Book of Ezra. The unexpected happened when the once mighty empire of Babylon fell to Cyrus. Almost immediately Cyrus decreed that the captives should be permitted to return to their homeland.

“The heads of the families of Judah and Benjamin” (Ezra 1:5) led the movement of the people from Babylon back to Jerusalem. It is significant that the author mentions these two tribes since they had been the most loyal supporters of the royal line of David and were among the last to be taken into the Babylonian captivity decades earlier. These tribes were the people who had made up the bulk of the Southern kingdom before its eventual fall to Babylon.

God’s promises are wonderful, filled with hope and the assurance of a worthwhile ending. Promises, however, always have responsibilities attached, and those responsibilities for the people of Judah were not simple.

Imagine what it would be like to make such a move over the caravan route from Babylon back to Jerusalem. The journey would be difficult, the assignment seemingly impossible, and the results perhaps unclear. The distance could have been as much as 1,000 miles. Even though Jewish families living in Babylon had no doubt talked often about such a

move, actually making the first steps must have been quite a challenge. The difficulties of travel in that primitive time would not be easy, and those who started must have known that some would never make it.

Most of those who chose to return would go to a land they had never seen. It had existed in the lore shared among the people, but it would be a strange new place. Those who chose to go would pull up roots from the only homes they had known, leaving jobs and friends. They would journey to a land that was inhabited by people who would not welcome their intrusion. Ancient historians tell us that many of the captives chose to remain in Babylon rather than risk the journey into an unknown future. Those who did start out may well have gone through times of wondering why they had ever left the security of the past for the uncertainty of the future.

In spite of the difficulties faced by the people of Judah, we read in the Book of Ezra the names of courageous people who were willing to obey. For them the promise of a fresh start was more than enough incentive to begin the journey. Their determination to obey the God whose patient love had helped them through the long years of captivity was greater than their fear of the journey. Little wonder that the Hebrew people preserved the story of this second exodus from captivity to freedom.

We must remember that the Book of Ezra was written decades after the fact of Judah's return. The temple work and the rebuilding of the walls were likely finished, but the recipients of this writing were in need of another *fresh start*. We can see behind the words of this story a people for whom the return and rebuilding were no longer exciting accomplishments. Perhaps the people had grown accustomed to their temple and the security of the walls. Perhaps they no longer had a sense of responsibility to live in reverence and obedience to God.

### The Place of Worship in the Life of a Restored People (1:6–11)

It is interesting to see the importance the author of Ezra gives to the place of the temple and all its objects in the life of a people returning to their homeland. Cyrus sent the people of other captured nations back to their homelands, and with them he sent their idols and statues that were part of their worship. Since Judah had no images or idols, Cyrus brought out the vessels from the Jerusalem temple that had been captured by the



Babylonians (2 Kings 25:14–15) and sent those with the returning exiles. It was clear to the people of faith that this meant a fresh start in worshiping their God in a land of promise.

We find throughout the Book of Ezra the names of people who were instrumental in Judah's return. The writer seems determined to have his readers know that the nation and the faith community they enjoyed was brought about by God's providential leading, but also through the hard work and sacrifice of real people. God's intervention inspired faithful people to fulfill God's purposes. Later generations should know this was not merely a distant legend, but rather an event made possible by courageous people of faith who followed their God's leading.

The place of divine intervention through human hands is a lasting reminder of the way in which God so often works. The prophets had promised God's restoration. It was accomplished through the decree of the emperor, the assistance of the people's neighbors in Babylon, and the labor of faithful believers.

In so many ways the message of this Old Testament book is centered on God's grace. It speaks of a people who, although they had been led away into exile by a conquering empire, had largely grown accustomed to their new environment. Harsh as life might have been, few seemed to be seeking liberation. It was through the unexpected intervention in the person of Cyrus that God initiated a restoration. Perceptive minds saw this as clearly the fulfillment of the promise voiced through the prophet Jeremiah (see Jeremiah 29:10–14) and kept alive through the witness of a faithful remnant.

One fact we should not miss is that some Judeans in Babylon believed in a God who reached beyond national boundaries. The Emperor Cyrus may have believed that the God of the Jews lived only in the Jerusalem

## CASE STUDY

A congregation located near the coast saw their community devastated by a hurricane. The people were forced to evacuate their homes for several days and move inland. Upon returning they found their church buildings destroyed. The people met that first Sunday on the site of the building to consider the future. What would you suggest to them as they consider beginning again as a congregation?

temple. Some of the captives may have agreed, feeling far removed from the God of their tradition. Others knew better. They sensed that God had gone to Babylon with them. Although they may have suffered for the sins of their fathers, a gracious God was with them, suffering alongside his wayward people. Now this God was leading them back for a fresh start.

### **This Lesson and Life**

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A lasting message from this text is the need to see that every day is a challenge to make a fresh start. Before the Babylonian invasion and the destruction of Jerusalem, the prophet Jeremiah had urged the people to a renewed devotion to God and God's purposes. Their refusal and the unwise leadership of their nation resulted in the people's exile. God's steadfast love endures, however, and the truth of this experience is one of hope. Jeremiah had declared that God would bring his people back for a new beginning. This chapter gives the beautiful picture of beginning again.

### **QUESTIONS**

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1. The Book of Ezra begins with Cyrus, king of Persia, being led by the God of the captive Jews to release the people. What lessons can we take from God's using non-Jewish people to accomplish a purpose for the Jews?

2. What experiences have you or your family faced that required a fresh start? In what ways did your faith in God affect your response to that challenge?
3. The text mentions the heads of two tribes who led the movement of people back to their homeland. What are the names of some significant people whom God has used in Baptist history or the history of your church to accomplish a challenging task?

4. The task of making a fresh start is exciting, but it also requires courage, ingenuity, and energy. What resources do you feel God has made available to enable us to begin again after some loss or difficulty? Share ways in which these resources have benefited you or someone in your family.