

Exploring Ezra

1. Ezra 1-2: Cyrus' Decree *Setting the Scene*

This series of cell notes accompany the morning sermon series and help us to look in detail at the books of Ezra and the accompanying prophets - Haggai & Zechariah. It is probably one of the least known parts of Old Testament Narrative and so we will start with some history to put it in context before we think about what we can learn from these books.

To Start With:

1. Get a large piece of paper. As a group, 'brainstorm' everything people know about the Temple of Solomon (eg. its appearance, function, place in Israel's society)

In 587 BC the Babylonian army invaded Judah and, in line with God's warnings to his people, destroyed the temple, slaughtering many and taking others into exile.

Considering the Text:

Read Lamentations 1: (Written after the fall of Jerusalem)

2. What is your response to Jeremiah's cry? What does it tell us about the state of God's people?

Many of us know the stories of exile in the Bible like Daniel and Esther - stories of a faithful few and God's protection for them. However the return from exile, prophesied by Jeremiah, is less well known to many of us. The story of Ezra fits into that period of return from exile.

3. Divide the cell into smaller groups of about four and give them each a copy of the map. (See Study 1 - Handout 1)
 - Ask them to write down on the back as many things as they know about Ezra (the book or man) in one minute.
 - Now on the map ask them to take two minutes to shade in where they think the Persian Empire stretched to at the time of Ezra.

Spend a few minutes sharing people's knowledge and comparing their maps with **Handout 2**.

4. Read Ezra 1.1-11

Given that they had been in exile in a pagan society for 70 years:

- a) How do you imagine the Jewish people would have reacted to hearing this decree?
- b) What do you think the pros and cons of returning to Jerusalem might have been for them? (especially given what you've read of how Jeremiah described the devastation!)

Read Jeremiah 25.12-13 and 29.10-11

5. What do these verses reveal to us about the character and perspective of God? How do you respond to that? (You might like to consider other biblical examples of people having to wait for God's timing)
6.
 - a) What does Ezra 1 give as the reason behind King Cyrus' decisions? What strikes you about that?
 - b) What might it teach us about who God does and doesn't use to further his plans?

Finally, read *Ezra 2.1, 64-70*. (You are welcome to read the whole chapter if time allows!)

7. What strikes you about the group who responded to Cyrus' invitation? (Or perhaps how many didn't!) Why do you think such a precise list of names and numbers is included in the records? In what ways do you find that encouraging?
8. Often when we are bogged down in day-to-day life, especially when things are difficult, it can be hard to see the 'big picture' of what God has done (or is doing) in the world or in our lives. How might these passages encourage us to have a different perspective?



Responding

Take a few minutes quietly to consider where you feel 'stuck' or overwhelmed at the moment. Then spend some time praying for those who feel 'stuck' in some situation - that God would move behind the scenes and bring about change, but also give them perspective to be faithful to him in that place, for now.