

Week 45
Ezra 1-6, Haggai, Zechariah, and Esther

Key Verse: Sing for joy and be glad, O daughter of Zion; for behold I am coming and I will dwell in your midst,” declares the LORD. Zechariah 2:10, NASB

The Return and Restoration

As we begin this study of the return it is important to keep in mind that we are talking about the inhabitants of the land of Judah, primarily the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. This return does not include the “Ten Lost Tribes” from the fall of Israel in 722 BC. We know that a few people from the other tribes moved to the land of Judah to continue worshipping God at His specified place, so this return could include them since they were inhabitants of the territory of Judah; however, the vast majority of these returning refugees are descendants of Judah and Benjamin.

As prophesied by Jeremiah (25:11-12), it’s been about 70 years since the first people of Judah (including Daniel) went into captivity, and now the return to Jerusalem begins. They repeatedly turned from God so God let them go—but not forever. These are His people and He is the one who brings them home; God orchestrates their return home.

Jeremiah 29:10-14, “For thus says the LORD, ‘When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans that I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. You will seek Me and find *Me* when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you,’ declares the LORD, ‘and I will restore your fortunes and will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you,’ declares the LORD, ‘and I will bring you back to the place from where I sent you into exile.’”

What does it mean to return home—home that has been ravished by war, burned to the ground, and left to foreigners and to ravish as they see fit? Oh the joy of approaching your homeland and seeing it from the distance! Oh the heartbreak of walking through the rubble and seeing the ruins. Remember, King Nebuchadnezzar “burned the house of the LORD, the king’s house, and all the houses of Jerusalem; even every great house he burned with fire,” and the army of the Chaldeans “broke down the walls around Jerusalem” (2 Kings 25:9-10). Solomon’s temple area and the beautiful Jerusalem have no resemblance to their former glory; they are now lying in 50-year-old ashes and ruins and overgrowth. Perhaps the apes and peacocks that King Solomon had imported had taken up residence in the once beautiful Jerusalem.

Probably the worst part was knowing the destruction was their own fault—it was avoidable. They had to have it their way and now their eyes behold the harvest of the seeds they planted. But, God has provided for their return, their restoration to their homeland and to their God. Be it ever so humble, there is no place like home! They have returned to the Promised Land! There’s a lot of clean up to do, but they can finally get started.

After their return from exile, Judah remained an almost insignificant territory of about 20 x 30 miles, inhabited by a population of perhaps 150,000. They enjoyed the benefits of Persia’s policy of religious toleration and limited self-rule, but definitely felt the subjugation to a foreign power (Neh 1:3; 9:36ff), and they suffered persistent opposition from their neighbors (Ezra 4:23; Dan 9:25). Judah was no longer an independent nation and they were no longer ruled by a

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Davidic king. It could be compared to a rancher leaving a large productive ranch he owned and returning to a dilapidated empty corral he rented.

The decree of Cyrus to allow Judah to return home was not a decision he made to serve God. This was a political decision. Cyrus’ plan was to allow exiles from all the various nations to return to their homelands and their many gods in return for their loyalty and defense against the enemies of Persia. The return was to their geographical homeland, but they were not their own autonomous nation as they had been. As best as can be determined through Biblical and historical references, the chronology of major events during the return era was as follows:

Chronology of the Exile and Return:

Year BC	Major Event	Prophet	
722	Fall of Israel and exile to Assyria	Previously discussed	
605	Beginning of Nebuchadnezzar’s raids on Judah	Daniel in Babylon (605-535) Ezekiel in Babylon (593-570)	Jeremiah in Jerusalem and Egypt (627-580) Obadiah (586)
Aug 14, 586	Fall of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar/Babylonians (2 Kings 25:8-12) and writings of book of Lamentations		
539	Fall of Babylon to Persians		
538	Cyrus’ decree allows first return of exiles to Jerusalem led by Sheshbazzar (about 50,000 return)	Ezra in Babylon (now Persia)	Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel (some believe these are the same man) as governor of Judah
538-537	Altar is rebuilt		
536	Temple rebuilding begins and is halted		
520	Temple rebuilding resumes		
516	Restoration of the Temple completed		
483	Events of book of Esther begin		
479	Esther becomes queen of Persia		
473	Days of Purim established		
458	Second return of exiles to Jerusalem under Ezra	Ezra in Judea until about 450	
445	Third (last) return of exiles to Jerusalem under		
			Nehemiah

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	Nehemiah		(governor of Judea) 445-433
445	Jerusalem’s wall rebuilt and completed Oct 2	Malachi (beginning around 440)	
432	Nehemiah returns to Persia		
430	Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem		
396	End of Old Testament prophets		
331	Alexander the Great conquered Persia		

Day 1, Ezra 1:1-11, Ezra 3:1-6; Isaiah 44:28-45:13, Reconnecting with God

1. Read Isaiah 44:28-45:13. From the prophecy of Isaiah, what do we know God did for Cyrus to enable him to capture Babylon?

2. Read Ezra 1:1-11. Considering this passage and the one in Isaiah, what did God do for His people to bring about their release to go to Jerusalem? Who was given permission to return to Jerusalem? Who actually returned?

3. You may find it interesting that the man who led this mission home, Zerubbabel, is also mentioned in Matthew 1:13 and Luke 3:27. What does this tell us about Zerubbabel? What is the significance even for us today of this man and his descendants returning to the land of Judah?

4. Read Ezra 3:1-6. What was the first major goal and accomplishment of the people who returned?

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5. According to verse 3, it was fearful, but they pressed on and restored worship and sacrifice to God. We are urged in Romans 12:1 to present our bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is our spiritual service of worship. What are some examples of this kind of sacrifice and worship? What fears does that stir up in us? How can we overcome those fears?

Prayer focus: Today we have learned that God provided their way home and the people responded by returning to the obedience and worship of the LORD of Heaven’s Armies. Consider bowing before God today and ask Him to give you one act of obedience for you to do as your spiritual service of worship today.

Day 2 – Ezra 3:7-4:24, Moving Forward and Standing Still!

Worship is restored, the people are living in obedience and unity, and they boldly begin the next step of rebuilding the Temple.

6. Read Ezra 3:7-13. What is happening in Jerusalem? Who all is involved? What happens when the Temple foundation is completed?

7. First Corinthians 3:11 tells us about the foundation of God’s people today. Who is that foundation? What specific praise and thanks will you offer to Him now?

Like any other building, God never intended for the restoration to end with completion of the foundation. It’s time to build on that foundation; it’s time to rebuild the Temple.

8. Read Ezra 4:1-24. Briefly summarize what happened with the building project. In verse 24, how is the progress of Temple reconstruction described?

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9. We know from historical documents that construction was at a standstill for 16 years. Perhaps you can relate to this non-productive period in your own life. Maybe you have now (or have had in the past) an assignment from God that you aren't allowed to complete—or even work on—at this time. What Bible stories or verses come to mind to encourage you and keep you faithful during your down time?
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Prayer focus: Read Psalm 37:1-11 and take some time to commit to wait on the Lord in the area that He currently has you waiting. It would also be beneficial to use these verses as a prayer guide for someone you know living in the waiting zone.

Day 3 – Ezra 5:1, Book of Haggai, Hearing from the Lord of Heaven's Armies

As we work to glean applicable truths from these Scriptures, it may be helpful to remember that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit; He lives in you; He was given to you by God; God bought you with His Son's blood so you must honor God with your body (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

In Jerusalem from 536 to 520 BC, Temple restoration is at a standstill so God sends forth his message.

10. Read Ezra 5:1. Who does God use to prophecy to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem? Who was over these prophets?
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11. Read Haggai 1:1-15. What is the main message in this portion of Scripture to the people in Haggai's day and to us today?
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12. How do the people respond to this message? What should be our response to this message?

13. Read Haggai 2:1-9. What is the main message in this portion of Scripture to them and us? What should be our response to this message?

14. Read Haggai 2:10-19. What is the main message in this portion of Scripture to them and us? What should be our response to this message?

15. Read Haggai 2:20-23. What is the main message in this portion of Scripture to Zerubbabel? What personal message do you have from God?

We have already learned that Zerubbabel was a descendant of David, and is in the ancestry of both Joseph (the step father of Jesus) and Mary, the mother of Jesus. His commission to serve as the Lord’s “signet ring” marked the beginning of God’s restoration of Israel and pointed to Jesus Christ who would rule in righteousness forever.

Prayer focus: Prayer is conversation with God and He speaks to us primarily through His Word. Jesus said, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me” (John 10:27 NASB). In your prayer time today, practice being the listener. Re-read Haggai 1:2-15 and record what you believe the Holy Spirit is saying to you.

Day 4 – Ezra 5:1, Zechariah 1-4, 6:15, 7:9-10, 8:9, and 8:16-17, Preparing the People

Just two months after Haggai’s ministry began, Zechariah began delivering the messages God was sending through him. Exact dates of some of his messages aren’t given and some believe his messages continued well beyond the completion of the Temple in 516 BC. His call was to

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prepare the people for proper worship in the Temple once the building project was completed. His first sermon was delivered about the time Temple rebuilding was resumed.

16. Read Ezra 5:1 and Zechariah 1:1-6. What does God want the people to know and remember as they work on the Temple?

17. Zechariah is given visions and then specific messages from those visions. Read Zechariah 1:14-17, 2:4-5, 2:10-13, 3:8-10, and 4:6-10. What are some of the messages God was sending through the visions?

1:14-17 _____

2:4-5 _____

2:10-13 _____

3:8-10 _____

4:6-10 _____

18. Read Zechariah 6:15. What is required of the people in order to be recipients of these promises?

19. Read Luke 6:46-49. What is required of believers today in order to endure the difficult circumstances that challenge our lives?

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20. The Lord used Zechariah to teach the people many important qualities they should possess as people of God. These qualities should also be prominent in our lives. List these characteristics found in Zechariah 7:9-10, 8:9, and 8:16-17.

7:9-10 _____

8:9 _____

8:16-17 _____

Prayer focus: Circle the quality above that you feel needs the most work in your life. Seek God for wisdom in becoming obedient to His call to right living in that area.

Day 5 – Book of Esther, Some Did not Return

Zerubbabel and Jeshua respond to the messages of Haggai and Zechariah and rebuilding of the Temple begins again (Ezra 5:1-2). This first returning group arrived in Jerusalem in 538 BC, but it was not until 516 BC—22 years later—that the Temple was completed. However, they did finally go back to work and complete the Temple. They still faced challenges and threats, but they trusted God and persevered and completed the work. Ezra 6:14 tells us the builders were “greatly encouraged by the preaching of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah.” Thank God for encouragers! After completion of the Temple there was a dedication ceremony and once again the Passover was celebrated, then they celebrated the Festival of Unleavened Bread. “There was great joy throughout the land” (Ezra 6:22 NLT).

There is a long interlude between the end of Ezra 6 and the beginning of Ezra 7. It is during this time that we get to meet Queen Esther. About 37 years after Temple completion Esther is crowned Queen of Persia, and about 5 years into her reign she is challenged to risk her life to save the Jewish race. The book of Esther reads like a novel, a book of stranger-than-fiction events. Please take the time to read it, consider putting your name in the place of Esther’s to help you get into the action of the historical story. Remember as you read the story, the events happen in Persia but even the Jewish people living in Judah are under the rule of Persia and the laws written apply to both groups.

21. Esther 2:5 tells us Esther and her uncle, Mordecai, were living in the fortress of Susa, which was the Persian capital. We also know Mordecai was of the tribe of Benjamin and his ancestors were exiled to Babylon about a century earlier. Since they are in Susa, they obviously chose not to return to Judah. Actually, there were many who did not return. What reasons can you think of that would keep them from returning to their Promised Land?

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22. In case you missed it, re-read Ezra 1:5 and describe one reason some may not have returned? How does this compare to Jesus’ words in John 6:44? How does it differ?

23. Today, just like the people of Judah, many Christians are living in an exile created by their own sins. What keeps them (or maybe you) from returning home to God?

24. In Luke 15:11-32 Jesus told the story of the Prodigal Son. This son realized that in order to come home he had to humble himself, ask for forgiveness, and serve the father. What can we, as sisters in Christ, do to encourage believers to return to God?

Prayer focus: Consider praying Psalm 86:5, 11-13, and 15 for yourself and as an intercessory prayer for someone you love.