

Weekend

1. The book of Ezra provides a good way into reading the other Old Testament literature relating to the same period. Try to read as much of it as you can over the weekend. (You will find a list of the relevant biblical books in the chart.)
2. Look up the reference to 'divorce' in a good Bible dictionary, and follow through some of the New Testament references.



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Meeting With God Bible Reading Notes

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Week 30: The book of Ezra (A historical study)

Ezra takes up the history of Israel where 2 Chronicles leaves off. (Compare verses 1-3 with the end of 2 Chronicles.) Ezra gives more than a record of the major events around Jerusalem spanning the reigns of five Persian emperors (see chart). He gives an insight into that history from a divine perspective.

Day 1. The God of history

Ezra 1

1. 'In order to fulfil the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah' (verse 1, NIV). Look up Jeremiah 29:10-14. Note (a) God's timescale; (b) God's conditions so that people will enter into the good of his plans. Who caused the people to want to meet these conditions (Ezra 1:5)?

Note: Verse 2. These Persian Emperors were certainly very powerful men. One of Cyrus' successors actually used the title 'king of kings' (Ezra 7:12).

2. As in the story of the exodus, God made sure that his people did not return empty-handed to the Promised Land (see verses 4 and 6). God used many means of providing for his work - including the gifts made by his own people. Write down the basis on which they decided how much to give - Ezra 2:68-69.
3. Think about the ways in which the Sovereign God has provided for your needs. In many cases probably we have far more! Think about how much you are able to give back to him.

Day 2. A good start, but ...

Ezra 3:1 - 4:5

1. What was the first thing the Jews did to re-establish worship at Jerusalem? Write down why they did this. What was the 'feast of booths' (RSV) all about? Why was this feast so appropriate for the returned exiles? God had done it again!

Note: 'Feast of booths' see Leviticus 23:33-43

2. When God's people heed God's word and start to do God's work in God's way, opposition is almost guaranteed. How does 4:4 show that the

Persian kings		Events in Ezra			Elsewhere in the Old Testament
Dates BC		Dates BC		Ref.	
539-530	Cyrus	537	Return from exile Altar set up	chs.1-2 ch.3	End of Daniel's Life Dan 1:21 ; 10:1
		536	Foundation of temple laid: opposition begins	chs.3-4	
530-522	Cambyses		(not mentioned)		
522-486	Darius 1 (Hystaspes)	520-516	Opposition continues Despite protests to the king, temple completed In response to the prophets	ch. 4:5,24 chs.5-6	Haggai & Zechariah
486-465	Xerxes 1 (Ahasuerus)		Further opposition	ch. 4:6	Esther
465-424	Artaxerxes 1 (Longimanus)	458	Opposition again! Decree to stop building Ezra sent to Jerusalem Ezra's journey and safe arrival Ezra deals with mixed marriages	ch. 47-23 ch. 7:1 ch.8 chs.9-10	Nehemiah Malachi

Samaritans were not really wanting to help? Why did the Jews not want their help if they had been worshipping the Lord as they said? (See 2 Kings 17:24-34 for some ideas.)

Ezra 4:6-23 need to be put 'in brackets'. They break into the flow of the historical sequence to show that the opposition of verses 1-5 became a recurring feature in the reigns of Ahasuerus and Artaxerxes. (The kings' names provide important historical pointers - see chart.) Verse 24 brings us back to the reign of Darius to give the link with chapter 5.

The people's song at the foundation ceremony was probably Psalm 136. Use it as an aid to your worship today. Celebrate God's goodness and steadfast love in the history of creation and redemption - and also to you (Psalm 136:23). God is still the same!

Day 3. On with the job!

Ezra 5 & 6

You can read the forceful words of Haggai and Zechariah in their books in the Old Testament. They certainly got the building work going again - and they weren't above lending a hand themselves (5:1-2)!

1. From chapter 5, how would you assess the reactions of the Jewish leaders to the enquiries of the governor? How do they show respect for both God and king? What lesson had history taught them about giving obedient service to God?

Notice the touch of the good historian in giving us copies of the original letter sent to King Darius (5:6ff.), of the official minute in 6:2-5 and of the king's reply (6:6ff.).

2. Note the ways in which chapter 6 illustrates the fact that 'the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men' (Daniel 4:17, NIV). There is no necessary conflict between obeying God and submitting to God-appointed authorities. How is this truth brought out in Ezra 6:14 and applied in Romans 13:1-7? (See your notes for Week 27, Study 3.)

The temple was completed in time for Passover. Ezra 6:21 is a valuable counter-balance to 4:3 as it proves beyond doubt that the Jewish leaders were not narrow-minded nationalists.

Think over what you have written today. Do you 'obey God rather than men' (Acts 5:29, NIV), yet give due respect to God-appointed rulers and to the laws of the land? Pray for several important leaders by name, and about your attitude to them.

Day 4. Ezra ... at last!

Ezra 7 & 8

Between chapters 6 and 7 there is almost a sixty-year gap. Building progress at Jerusalem had been minimal, and you can read about the continuing opposition to

the work during this period in 4:6-23. During this time also, the events of the book of Esther took place. Now Artaxerxes had succeeded to the throne and in the year 458 BC he sent Ezra to Jerusalem. Ezra was a scribe who knew God's law well and who could trace his ancestry back to Aaron. Furthermore, he enjoyed the favour of the king (7:1-6).

Words like the 'good hand' (or 'the blessing') of his God was upon him, or 'God helped', keep cropping up in Ezra and Nehemiah. From these chapters, make a note of (a) the results of God's blessing being upon Ezra; (b) the kind of person upon whom God's hand rests for good.

Do you depend on God for daily protection, provision and wisdom? That question can be answered by looking at the priority you place on prayer, on seriously studying the Bible, and your expectations. Think about how you can follow Ezra's example in 7:10 and 8:22-23 and ask God to keep your heart set in that way. Then praise him for some of the things that have happened to you under his good hand.

Day 5. Not race - religion

Ezra 9 & 10

A superficial reading of these chapters might leave the impression that Ezra was a hardened racist and an advocate of divorce. Neither description would fit him - any more than it would fit God, whose law Ezra had taught with such devastating effect.

1. Write down the cause of Ezra's violent reaction in 9:1-5. Why was marriage to foreign wives considered 'unfaithfulness', an offence, or sin (verses 2 and 4)? Look up Deuteronomy 7:1-6. Why was marriage to foreigners outlawed for God's holy people?
2. Ezra's concern was not only that Israel had broken faith with God by disregarding his law (9:10-12), but that the returned exiles had also sinned against God's mercy (9:13-15). Look over his prayer of confession in 9:6-15. How does he sum up the history of Israel? How does he interpret his own day - especially for the small part of Israel (the 'remnant', 9:8) that had returned to the land?

Malachi (probably Ezra's contemporary) gives a valuable insight into the situation in Malachi 2:10-16. It would appear that Jews may have been divorcing their Jewish wives in favour of the women of the land.

3. What is God's attitude to divorce? Why do you think that divorce was the only solution to Israel's problem in Ezra 10?

Ezra identified himself with the sin of the people as he prayed to God (9:6ff.). Try to enter into his attitude as you confess your sin in the light of both God's law and God's grace. Then pray for the nation and for God's church today.