

Reading Schedule for May 21-27, 2018

Are you excited to focus on the Old Testament for a few weeks? These three books go together as they are written after Israel had been in exile in Babylon. 50,000 Hebrews returned to Jerusalem to rebuilt God's house and re-establish their lives. During this time, Haggai and Zechariah prophesy during the reconstruction period. Ezra will be a great example to us. He is a humble, obedient man who is committed to serving God first and foremost. We will read a chapter a day, except on Tuesday we will read two chapters because chapter 2 is just a long list of people returning to Jerusalem.

May 21 - Ezra 1: "Then the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and Levites—everyone whose heart God had moved—prepared to go up and build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem." (v.5) For you to understand the context, a quote from the Bible commentary uses these words: "Cyrus was king over the entire region that had once been Assyria and Babylon. Assyria had deported the Israelites from the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C. Babylon, the next world power, had taken Israelites captive from the Southern Kingdom, which we know as Judah, in 586 B.C. King Cyrus' proclamation of freedom was sent to all 12 tribes, but only Judah and Benjamin responded and returned to build God's temple, numbering around 50,000. The ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom had been so fractured and dispersed that many might have been unsure of their real heritage. Because of this, they seemed disinterested in rebuilding the temple and uprooting their lives to do so." It is interesting that Cyrus was obviously not a Jew, but God had worked through him to free the exiled Jews to their homeland. This first chapter helps us to enter into the historical setting of how God honored his promise to deliver his people from bondage after 70 years, as Jeremiah prophesied. What stands out to you in this introductory chapter?

May 22 - Ezra 2 & 3: "Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the Lord, both the morning and evening sacrifices." (3:3) I think it is impressive that the first act the Jews did was to build the altar in honor of God. This symbolized his presence and protection. The Jews wanted to be a theocracy, as was their posture throughout their previous history, and so putting God at the center was the best thing that they could do upon their return. The sacrifices represented their desire for God's forgiveness, as well as rededicating themselves to his purposes. It is a marvelous first step; one that can be repeated in our own lives. There is no question that the number one command is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul . . . What do you learn from the example of the Jews as they begin their new life in Jerusalem?

May 23 - Ezra 4: "Then the peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building." (v.4) This seems to highlight the main theme of this chapter. Discouragement and fear are obviously some of the greatest obstacles that hinder our work for the Lord. We lose motivation and are filled with anxiety as we experience obstacles of opposition. We know that opposition is a part of the journey as a follower of Christ. Hardhearted unbelievers and evil spiritual forces are always working against God and his people. This had to be a very discouraging time in the life of God's people. But even though there seems to be a standstill, God will have his way in due time. Paul told Timothy this fact. "Everyone who wants to live the godly life in Jesus Christ will be persecuted." (2 Timothy 3:12) These words apply to this chapter. How do you respond to them?

May 24 - Ezra 5: "Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Joshua son of Jozadak set to work to rebuild the house of God in Jerusalem. And the prophets of God were with them, supporting them." (v.2) It may have been a ten year interlude, but God's people gained

courage, with the backing of the prophets of God to continue the construction of the Temple. The non-Jews who lived nearby attempted to hinder the construction of the Temple. While the debate went on and the decision was under appeal, the Jews continued to rebuild. They were shored up by the words of the prophets and renewed in their courage to fulfill their purpose before God. God will accomplish his purposes in this world no matter who attempts to block them. Just as he watched over the Jewish elders, he watches over you. There are many historical aspects to the story that I am just remembering, so I am finding it fascinating to read about this piece of God's work among his people. I hope you are too. What are you learning?

May 25 - Ezra 6: "The temple was completed on the third day of the month Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius." (v.15) According to Ezra, the temple was completed in 516 B.C. It took 20 years to complete the Temple, with 10 years having the project lay dormant. There was a great celebration over the completion of God's house. The Temple was such a unifying symbol of God's protection and presence in their midst. They celebrated with incredible enthusiasm. They culminated this celebration with the Passover. It is important to celebrate God's victories in your life. Don't be bashful about praise, thanksgiving and abundant enthusiasm because of God's help on your behalf, or with those who you love. Does that make sense?

May 26 - Ezra 7: ". . . this Ezra came up from Babylon. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the Lord, the God of Israel, had given. The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the Lord his God was on him." (v.6) Ezra arrives on the scene, which is surprising because we have anticipated his involvement previously. However, Ezra is most likely the author of this historical book, and now he enters the scene knowing all that has taken place and ready to minister to the people, establishing the principles of God among the people. There is probably a gap of almost 60 years between chapter 6 and chapter 7. The story in the Book of Esther occurs during this time. Xerxes reigned from 486-465 B.C. and then his son, Artaxerxes became king in 465. Ezra returns to Jerusalem in 458. Ezra demonstrates how a gifted Bible teacher can move God's people forward. He was effective because he was a well-versed student of the Law of the Lord, and because he was determined to obey God's principles and direction. Ezra would be a very important part of the rest of the story, as he becomes our example of dedication and obedience to the living God. What stands out to you in this chapter that stirs your heart?

May 27 - Ezra 8: "There, by the Ahava Canal, I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions." (v.21) Have you ever begun a road trip asking God's protection, that He would watch over you? Oftentimes as our family would leave for a vacation or any substantial road trip, we would begin with prayer. Ezra adds a dimension to their spiritual preparation for the journey by proclaiming a fast. Fasting is a rare practice in our world today. But fasting demonstrates a sense of focus on the Lord and him being the true nourishment of our lives. Fasting portrays a sense of seriousness and dedication as well. Ezra and the people traveled approximately 900 miles on foot. The trip took them through dangerous and difficult territory and lasted for four months. It is easy to see why they would want God's guidance and protection. Likewise, we should have the same kind of dependency and desire in our life for God's protection, control and guidance. How do you respond to this chapter?

PRAYER: Pray for the families of those who have lost loved ones in the military conflicts that are so prevalent in our world as we approach Memorial Day. Let's thank God for those who serve our country, and especially pray for those who grieve the loss of a loved one as they fought for our freedom.