

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDUCTIVE STUDY IN THE BOOK OF EZRA

BACKGROUND, INTRODUCTION, AND CHAPTER ONE

The Old Testament tells three thrilling rescue stories about salvation in impossible circumstances. The first is of Noah who built a boat for 100 years to pluck his family and animal and bird life from the flood, the greatest natural disaster in human history. The second is of Moses, miraculously adopted into the Egyptian royal family, outlawed into the desert until he was an old man when he was called to plead before Pharaoh for his Hebrew people, and finally to lead them through the Red Sea and out of Egypt to begin a new life of freedom. The third story is in many ways the most surprising of all when the Jewish people were able to return to their own country after 70 years of captivity in Babylon and then, because of conquest, the new empire of Persia. Who was the saviour this time?

The Jews were enslaved to Babylon after many warnings because they listened to leaders who led them into worshipping false gods. Jeremiah had repeatedly warned them of what would happen and why.(Jer.25:8) He had also told them their captivity would only be for 70 years, and he was exactly right.(Jer.25:12; 29:10) Various prophets had encouraged them during those 70 years to a change of heart, to be ready for what God would do. Ezekiel had lived among the ordinary people for the first 34 years and Daniel had infiltrated successive governments for the whole 70 years with a plain message to trust the one true God and no-one else.

When the time came for them to return to Judah, who would lead them this time? The prophet Isaiah more than one hundred years before had told them his name, Cyrus.(Isa.44:28-45:17) But Cyrus was a Persian king who never went with the Jews to Judah. He would simply give the order allowing them to leave and commanding them to return and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. He would also equip them with the resources to do the work.(II Chron.36:22,23; Ezra 1:1-4) As the Jews travelled back to Jerusalem the spirit of King Cyrus was with them. He was a remarkable picture of Jesus Christ who would one day command His disciples to make disciples of all nations, to build His new temple, His church. He promised His presence in us to make it happen.(Matt.28:18-20)

The actual return to Judah was a long drawn out process which began in 536 BC with the first instruction to rebuild the temple. Sacrifice could begin again, foreshadowing the cross, where Jesus died so that we could be forgiven. It was 79 years later that Ezra came himself to re-establish the work of the priests in the temple and to lead the task of teaching the word of God by which they and now we can discover how to live the Christian life individually. Finally 12 more years passed before Nehemiah was sent in 445 BC with a commission from a new king of Persia to rebuild the walls of the city of Jerusalem so that the Jews could again become a functioning society. Between them they show us step by step what is involved in translating the Christian message into a thriving Christian

community. The story of the return to Jerusalem also shows us some of the obstacles and opposition we too will encounter as we seek to fulfil the King's commission.

So Ezra himself does not appear in the book which bears his name until chapter 7. If he was the actual writer he presumably compiled the first six chapters much later from the records kept by others, with the Holy Spirit guiding his writing.(II Tim.3:16)

God had given very clear, specific instructions to King Cyrus. He was to build a new temple to God in Jerusalem. Cyrus spoke his message and wrote it down so that there need be no argument later about what his instructions had been. Jesus did the same. He spoke to His followers in Israel in the first century and to be quite sure there was no confusion He inspired the gospel writers to put His plan down on paper. He still speaks to us in our hearts but at the same time gives us a written record, the Bible. There should be no mistake! Cyrus wanted those who received his message to go and do the work. He wanted all of his people who were open to his instruction to help in every way they could to support those who did the work. Their contribution was to be freely given; it was not a tax!(1:1-4)

How would they respond? There was a mass movement of both leaders and ordinary people, stirred up by the Holy Spirit, not just human pressure, to be part of God's programme. At the same time there was a generous response from the whole community who would not necessarily be going themselves to help. After 70 years of poverty as slaves they could have had every excuse for saying they could not afford to help. Like the widow with two small coins,(Mark 12:42-44) they willingly put in all they had. When put together their gifts amounted to a substantial amount. But what mattered most was their love. In their hearts they were going with the workers to Jerusalem. Knowing this would have been a huge encouragement to the brave pioneers as they set off. Cyrus himself was true to his word and provided all they would need to equip and operate the temple again.(1:5-11)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. It would greatly help you in getting the most out of this study to read through the whole book of Ezra, preferably in one sitting. When you have done so summarise the story as a whole. How does this book illustrate our own struggles?
2. How is Jesus Christ presented in the book of Ezra? What answers are provided to their difficulties and to ours? What passages did you find hard to understand? Expect as you go through the study that God will answer those questions and each time He does lead you to an exciting new discovery.
3. How are the ideas presented in Ezra developed in the New Testament? Are there any apparent contradictions? How can they be resolved?