

Small Group Guide: Ezra Part 1

Character Studies in the Old Testament

Opening Prayer & Introduction (5-10 minutes)

****Leader Tip:**** Begin by asking someone to read Ezra 7:10 aloud, then open in prayer asking God to anchor your hearts in His Word during this discussion.

Ice Breaker Question (5 minutes)

- What's one book, movie, or story character who made a significant comeback after a devastating loss? What made their story compelling?

Sermon Recap (5 minutes)

****Key Points:****

- Ezra was a priest and scribe who led exiles back to Jerusalem to rebuild not just structures, but hearts
- God's faithfulness brought Israel back after 70 years of exile, just as He promised
- Ezra was marked by three commitments: studying God's Word, obeying it, and teaching it
- The people had compromised by intermarrying with idolatrous cultures (syncretism)

- True renewal requires repentance and return to God's Word

Discussion Questions

Section 1: God's Faithfulness in Exile (15 minutes)

1. **Understanding Context:** The Israelites spent 70 years in Babylonian exile because of persistent idolatry and injustice. How does understanding this historical context help us see God's character more clearly?
2. **Modern Exile:** The pastor described the modern church as "a church in exile." In what ways do you see the contemporary church living in spiritual exile today?
3. **God's Timing:** God fulfilled His promise to bring Israel back at the appointed time through King Cyrus. Share a time when God's timing in your life seemed slow, but eventually proved faithful.

Section 2: Ezra's Heart for God's Word (15 minutes)

4. **The Three-Part Pattern:** Ezra 7:10 shows Ezra's commitment to (1) study, (2) obey, and (3) teach God's Word—in that order. Which of these three do you find most challenging personally? Why?
5. **Setting Your Heart:** The Hebrew phrase "set his heart" means to firmly establish or anchor. What practical steps can you take to more firmly anchor your heart in Scripture rather than casually skimming it?

6. **Living Before Teaching:** Ezra lived out God's Word before he taught it. How does our culture (including Christian culture) sometimes reverse this order? What are the consequences?

Section 3: The Danger of Compromise (15 minutes)

7. **Spiritual Syncretism:** The Israelites had mixed true worship with idolatrous practices. The pastor listed modern examples: "a little secular psychology, a little foul language, a little partying... a few drinks and the occasional trip to the club."

- Do you agree these represent compromise? Why or why not?
- What other subtle compromises do Christians commonly make today?

8. **Holiness Redefined:** The sermon emphasized that Ezra's concern wasn't racism but covenant faithfulness. How does our culture misunderstand biblical holiness? How would you explain "holy and set apart" to a non-Christian friend?

9. **Ezra's Grief:** Ezra tore his garments and pulled out his hair when he discovered the people's compromise. His reaction was emotional and intense. How should spiritual leaders today respond to compromise in the church? What's the difference between righteous grief and self-righteous judgment?

Section 4: Personal Application (15 minutes)

10. **Your Calling:** The pastor said, "I do not necessarily know what God is calling you to do, but I know He is calling you to do something as your heart is anchored in His word."

- What might God be calling you to do right now?
- How does being anchored in God's Word clarify or confirm that calling?

11. **Examining Your Heart:** Take a moment of silent reflection. Ask yourself: "What 'marriages' have I made with the world? Where have I compromised my devotion to Christ?" (Allow 2-3 minutes of silence, then invite voluntary sharing)

12. **The Gospel Connection:** Ezra's work helped preserve the line through which Jesus would come. How does seeing Ezra as part of God's redemptive story change how you view seemingly "small" acts of obedience in your own life?

Key Takeaways

Write these on a board or share on screen:

1. **God Still Uses Word-Anchored People:** Churches drift toward compromise unless God raises up people who study, obey, and teach His Word.

2. **Holiness Still Matters:** Being set apart for God means loving Him enough to tear down idols and reorder our relationships, habits, and affections.

3. **Renewal Begins with Repentance:** Genuine revival comes from hearing God's Word, understanding it, confessing sin, and walking in renewed obedience.

Practical Applications

Challenge your group to choose at least one:

This Week:

- **Study:** Commit to reading one chapter of Scripture daily using the "set your heart" method—read slowly, ask what it means, and ask how you should respond.
- **Examine:** Make a list of areas where you've compromised with the world. Confess these to God and to a trusted Christian friend.
- **Obey First:** Identify one biblical command you've been avoiding. Obey it this week before talking about it with anyone else.

This Month:

- **Memorize Ezra 7:10:** Write it on a card and place it where you'll see it daily.
- **Audit Your Influences:** Evaluate your media consumption, relationships, and habits. What needs to be separated from your life to maintain holiness?
- **Find Your "Ezra":** Identify someone in your life who models studying, obeying, and teaching God's Word. Ask them to mentor you or meet regularly.

This Season:

- **Lead a Return:** Like Ezra led exiles back to Jerusalem, consider who you might lead back to faithful obedience—a family member, friend, or fellow believer who's drifted.

Closing Exercise (10 minutes)

Guided Prayer of Repentance and Commitment:

Leader: Guide the group through a time of prayer using these prompts (pause after each for silent reflection):

1. "Lord, show me where I've compromised with the world..." (30 seconds silence)
2. "Forgive me for..." (30 seconds silence)
3. "Help me to anchor my heart in Your Word by..." (30 seconds silence)
4. "Give me courage to obey You in..." (30 seconds silence)

Close by having someone read this benediction:

"May the God who stirred the heart of Cyrus and strengthened the hand of Ezra also stir your heart and strengthen your hand to study His Word, obey His commands, and teach His truth. May you be a rebuilders of hearts in a generation that desperately needs to return to Him. Amen."

Leader Preparation Notes

Before the meeting:

- Read Ezra chapters 1, 7, 9, and 10
- Pray for sensitivity to any in your group who may be struggling with compromise
- Be prepared to share your own areas of compromise vulnerably
- Have extra Bibles available for those who want to look up passages

During the meeting:

- Create a safe space for honest confession
- Avoid being preachy; facilitate discussion rather than lecture
- Watch the time—you may not get through all questions

- Be ready to offer grace while also calling the group to holiness

****After the meeting:****

- Follow up with anyone who shared something particularly vulnerable
- Send a midweek encouragement text with Ezra 7:10
- Pray for your group members by name throughout the week

Additional Resources

- ****For Further Study:**** Read the entire book of Ezra (10 chapters) before next week
- ****Recommended Reading:**** "The Return to Grace" by Sinclair Ferguson
- ****Worship Song:**** "Anchor" by Skillet or "Build Your Kingdom Here" by Rend Collective