THE BOOK OF EZRA

The King Who Builds Again

Ezra, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King Who Builds Again: The Book of Ezra, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

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In the author's own text, pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence. Scripture quotations follow the WEB Protestant Edition exactly, including its capitalization.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

You know the saying by now: “If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all.” 2 Chronicles ended with a door swinging open. After seventy years of exile, the king of Persia told God’s people they could go home and rebuild. Ezra is the story of what happened when they walked through that door.

It wasn’t easy. The people who went back found ruins, hostile neighbors, crushing poverty, and endless red tape. They started strong, got discouraged, and quit for sixteen years. Then God sent prophets to get them moving again. Decades later, a teacher named Ezra arrived and called them back to God’s word, and the book ends with one of the hardest decisions in the whole Bible.

So why read it? Because Ezra is about starting over. It’s about what happens when God gives you a second chance and you have to actually do the work of rebuilding: your faith, your habits, your relationships, your life. It’s honest about how hard that is. And it shows that God is faithful through every delay, every setback, and every small beginning.

Let’s go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through Ezra in six chapters: the decree of Cyrus and the first return (Ezra 1–2), the altar and the foundation (3), opposition and the long stall (4–5), the Second Temple finished (6), Ezra’s journey and mission (7–8), and the hard ending (9–10).

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains what kind of book Ezra is, when it happened, and how it connects to Chronicles, Nehemiah, and the prophets. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain modern translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (Scripture is quoted exactly as the WEB prints it; in the rest of the book, pronouns for God are capitalized out of reverence); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, especially the end of the book, where Ezra and the leaders send away foreign wives and their children, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. This book quotes Ezra in places and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. It's the fifteenth book in The Old Testament for Teens, a companion to the New Testament for Teens series, written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Ezra is a book about rebuilding after loss, and it speaks well to teenagers who are working out their own faith. It also ends with a genuinely difficult passage: the decision in chapters 9–10 to send away foreign wives and their children. This book treats that passage carefully. A hard-passage box explains that the concern was religious, the fear of returning to the idolatry that led to exile, rather than ethnic, noting that foreigners like Rahab and Ruth were welcomed into Israel. It also presents fairly the debate among scholars and Christians over whether Ezra's measure was God's command for that moment or a painful human overreaction, citing Malachi 2:16 and 1 Corinthians 7:12–13.

Because this passage involves divorce and separated families, a second, gentle box speaks directly to teens from divorced or mixed-faith families, assuring them that they are not a mistake, that God's love for them is not in question, and encouraging them to talk with a trusted adult. You may want to read that chapter together.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how the New Testament sees the Second Temple and the renewal of God's people fulfilled in Jesus, while acknowledging that Jewish readers treasure Ezra as a founder of the tradition of studying and teaching the Torah. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will see in Ezra a God who builds again, and will set their own hearts, like Ezra, to seek His word, to do it, and to share it.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

What Kind of Book Is This?

Ezra is history, built partly from official documents. It includes lists of the people who returned, letters to and from Persian kings, royal decrees, and, in the second half, Ezra's own first-person memoir. Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one scroll in the Hebrew Bible, telling one story in two parts: rebuilding the temple and the people (Ezra), then rebuilding the walls and the city (Nehemiah). Later they were divided into two books.

When It Happened

Ezra covers about eighty years. It opens in 538 BC, when Cyrus king of Persia allowed the exiles to return. The temple was finished in 516 BC. Then the story jumps nearly sixty years, past the events of the book of Esther, to 458 BC, when Ezra himself arrives in Jerusalem. Nehemiah arrives about thirteen years after that.

The World of Ezra

The Persian Empire was the largest the world had ever seen, stretching from India to Egypt. Unlike the Assyrians and Babylonians, the Persians generally let conquered peoples return to their homelands and worship their own gods, as long as they paid taxes and stayed loyal. Judah, now called Yehud, was a tiny province in a region the Persians called Beyond the River, meaning west of the Euphrates. Jerusalem was still largely in ruins, and the

returning exiles were few, poor, and surrounded by neighbors who didn't want them there.

Two Languages

Most of Ezra is written in Hebrew. But two sections, 4:8–6:18 and 7:12–26, are written in Aramaic, the international language of the Persian Empire. These sections are mostly official letters and decrees, and the writer seems to have copied them in their original language, like including original documents in a history report. It's one of the reasons scholars think Ezra drew on real Persian records.

Prophets of the Return

Two short books of prophecy, Haggai and Zechariah, come from the middle of Ezra's story, when the temple rebuilding had stalled. Malachi probably comes from a little later, around the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. Reading them alongside Ezra helps fill in what the people were thinking and feeling.

The Map

Chapter 1 (Ezra 1–2): Let him go up.

Chapter 2 (Ezra 3): Weeping and shouting.

Chapter 3 (Ezra 4–5): Stalled.

Chapter 4 (Ezra 6): Finished.

Chapter 5 (Ezra 7–8): Ezra sets his heart.

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CHAPTER 1

Let Him Go Up

Ezra 1–2

Ezra begins exactly where 2 Chronicles ends, almost word for word. In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, to fulfill what God had said through Jeremiah, "the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia," and Cyrus issued a decree. The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem. Whoever belongs to His people may go up to Jerusalem and rebuild. And whoever stays behind should help with silver, gold, supplies, animals, and gifts for the temple.

It's 538 BC. Seventy years earlier, Jeremiah had said that the exile would have an end date. Long before that, the prophet Isaiah had even named Cyrus as the one God would use, saying of Jerusalem, "She will be built," and of the temple, "Your foundation will be laid." Now a Persian emperor who doesn't worship the LORD is carrying out the LORD's plan.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why Would Cyrus Do This?**
>
> Cyrus the Great was a brilliant ruler who built the Persian Empire by conquering Media, Lydia, and Babylon. Unlike the Assyrians and Babylonians before him, he had a policy of allowing conquered peoples to return home and restore their temples. The Cyrus Cylinder, a clay inscription found in Babylon and now in the British Museum, describes this policy in his own

words. Cyrus probably saw it as good politics: grateful peoples were loyal peoples, and he wanted every god in his empire praying for him. But Ezra sees something deeper. The real reason Cyrus made his decree was that the LORD stirred up his spirit. God can work through anyone, even people who don't know Him, to keep His promises.

Here's a detail that's easy to miss. Not everyone went back. After seventy years, most of the exiles had built lives in Babylon. They had houses, businesses, and families there. Jeremiah had even told them to settle down, plant gardens, and pray for the city. Going back meant leaving all that behind for a ruined city in a poor province, a journey of about nine hundred miles that would take around four months on foot.

So who went? "Then the heads of fathers' households of Judah and Benjamin, the priests and the Levites, all whose spirit God had stirred to go up, rose up to build the LORD's house which is in Jerusalem." The same God who stirred up Cyrus stirred up the hearts of His people. Those who went didn't just decide on their own. God moved them.

REAL TALK **When God Stirs Your Heart**

Have you ever felt a pull toward something you couldn't quite explain? A desire to get closer to God, to help someone, to change a habit, to serve, or to take a risk for something good? Sometimes that's God stirring your heart. It doesn't always come with a voice from heaven. Often it's a quiet, persistent tug. The exiles who went back had to leave comfort behind and step into something hard. Not everyone did. When you sense God stirring you, pay attention. Talk to Him about it. Talk to a wise adult. And don't be surprised if following that pull means leaving something comfortable behind.

The people who stayed in Babylon helped those who left, giving them silver, gold, supplies, livestock, and valuable gifts. Then Cyrus

does something remarkable. He brings out the gold and silver bowls, dishes, and utensils that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Solomon's temple decades earlier, and he hands them over. Ezra counts them: 5,400 items in all. They're given to a man named Sheshbazzar, called the prince of Judah, who brings them back to Jerusalem.

Think about what that meant. These were the very objects the Babylonians had carried away when they burned the temple. For seventy years, they had sat in the house of a foreign god. Now they were going home. It was a sign that the story wasn't over. What had been taken would be restored.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel**
>
> Ezra mentions two leaders of the first return: Sheshbazzar, called the prince of Judah, and Zerubbabel, who leads most of the later work. Scholars aren't sure how they relate. Some think they were the same person with two names, one Babylonian and one Hebrew, as Daniel was also called Belteshazzar. Others think Sheshbazzar was an older leader, possibly Jehoiachin's son, and Zerubbabel his nephew who took over. Either way, Zerubbabel was a grandson of King Jehoiachin, the exiled king released from prison at the end of 2 Kings. He was a son of David. The royal line was still alive, and it was leading God's people home.

There's also something worth noticing about who stayed behind. They weren't condemned for staying. Ezra simply says they helped. Not everyone is called to the same thing. Some people are called to go, and some are called to support those who go. Some families uprooted their lives and walked nine hundred miles. Others stayed in Babylon and gave generously so the travelers would have what they needed. Both were part of God's plan. The same is true today. Some people become missionaries, pastors, or volunteers who go to hard places. Others stay where they are and pray, give, encourage,

and support them. If you're not the one going, you can still be part of the story by helping the ones who are.

Chapter 2 is a long list of the people who returned, organized by family and hometown. Like the genealogies in Chronicles, it's easy to skip. But think about what it meant to be on that list. These were the people who said yes. Their names were remembered.

The list includes ordinary families, priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and temple servants. Some families couldn't prove their ancestry, and some priests whose records couldn't be found weren't allowed to serve until the question was settled. The whole group totaled 42,360 people, plus about 7,300 servants and 200 singers. They brought horses, mules, camels, and donkeys.

When they arrive, some of the family leaders give generously toward rebuilding. "They gave according to their ability." Not everyone gave the same amount, but everyone gave what they could. Then they settle in their towns, and all Israel is back in its land.

REAL TALK **A Small Beginning**

Compare the numbers. Solomon's kingdom had hundreds of thousands of fighting men. The returning group was around fifty thousand people, including servants, in a land that was mostly ruins. It must have felt small. Later, the prophet Zechariah would ask, "who despises the day of small things?" Many of the best things in life start small: a friendship, a new habit, a small group of people praying, a first step of faith. Don't despise small beginnings. God often starts with less than we'd expect.

BACKGROUND CHECK **One Scroll, Two Books**

In the Hebrew Bible, Ezra and Nehemiah were originally a single book, and ancient Jewish writers counted them as one. They were first divided in Christian Bibles around the third century AD, and much later in printed

Hebrew Bibles too. Reading them together helps. Ezra focuses on rebuilding the temple and renewing the people's faith; Nehemiah focuses on rebuilding the city walls and the community. Both share the same themes: God keeps His promises, opposition comes, God's people need His word, and faithfulness is hard but worth it. Some of the same people even appear in both, including Ezra himself, who reads the law to the people in Nehemiah 8.

KEY VERSE

Then the heads of fathers' households of Judah and Benjamin, the priests and the Levites, all whose spirit God had stirred to go up, rose up to build the LORD's house which is in Jerusalem.

Ezra 1:5 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God used a foreign king like Cyrus to send His people home?
2. If you had been an exile in Babylon, do you think you would have gone back? Why or why not?
3. Has God ever stirred your heart to do something? What happened?
4. Why do you think Ezra included the long list of names in chapter 2?

TRY THIS *Write down one thing you sense God might be stirring your heart to do. Talk to Him about it every day this week, and share it with one person you trust.*

CHAPTER 2

Weeping and Shouting

Ezra 3

In the seventh month after they arrive, the people gather in Jerusalem "as one man." The seventh month was the season of Israel's most important festivals, including the Feast of Booths, when they remembered living in tents in the wilderness after leaving Egypt. Now they were living in a kind of wilderness again.

Before they build anything else, before they build houses or walls or even the temple itself, they build an altar. Jeshua the priest and Zerubbabel lead the work, and they set it up on its old foundation, "as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God." Then they begin offering sacrifices to the LORD every morning and every evening.

And they do it scared. "In spite of their fear because of the peoples of the surrounding lands, they set the altar on its base." They knew their neighbors didn't want them there. They had no walls. They had no army. They were vulnerable. And the first thing they did was worship.

> **REAL TALK** **Worship First**
>
> The returning exiles had a long list of urgent needs: houses, food, safety, farms, a city wall. And the first thing they built was an altar. They put God first, not after everything else was settled, but before. It's a challenge for anyone. When life is overwhelming, prayer and worship are often the first

> things we drop. We're too busy, too stressed, too tired. The exiles show another way. When you're afraid and everything feels uncertain, start with God. Jesus said to seek first God's kingdom. It's not that the other things don't matter. It's that everything else goes better when God is at the center.

They celebrate the Feast of Booths. They restart the regular offerings for new moons and festivals. People begin to bring freewill offerings. But the writer adds a quiet note: "but the foundation of the LORD's temple was not yet laid." They had an altar, but no temple.

So they hire stonecutters and carpenters, and they send food, drink, and olive oil to the people of Tyre and Sidon to bring cedar logs from Lebanon by sea, just as Solomon had done centuries before. Cyrus has given them permission.

In the second year after they arrive, Zerubbabel and Jeshua begin the work. They put the Levites, starting at twenty years old, in charge of the construction. Young people are leading the rebuild.

It's worth noticing that the Levites in charge started at twenty years old. Under David, the minimum age for some Levite service had been twenty-five or thirty. Now there may simply not have been enough older Levites, so younger ones were given responsibility. Whatever the reason, young adults were trusted with one of the most important jobs in the community: overseeing the rebuilding of God's house. Sometimes young people are told to wait their turn, to sit back until they're older. There's wisdom in learning from experience. But there are also moments when God puts important work into young hands. Paul told Timothy not to let anyone look down on him because he was young. If you're given responsibility, take it seriously. Your age doesn't disqualify you from doing something that matters.

When the builders finish laying the foundation, they throw a celebration. The priests stand in their robes with trumpets. The Levites, the sons of Asaph, stand with cymbals, just as David had arranged long ago. And they sing to each other, back and forth, "For he is good, for his loving kindness endures forever toward Israel." It's the same song sung when the ark came to Jerusalem and when Solomon dedicated the first temple. "All the people shouted with a great shout."

But not everyone is shouting.

"But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' households, the old men who had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice. Many also shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people."

Picture that scene. The younger people, born in exile, had never seen a temple. To them, this foundation was amazing, a dream coming true. But the older people, some of whom had been children when Solomon's temple was destroyed fifty years earlier, remembered what it used to be: the gold, the size, the glory. This foundation was so much smaller. They couldn't help but weep.

Both groups were right. It was a day for joy, and it was a day for grief. And the sounds blended together so completely that no one could tell them apart.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Were the Old Men Weeping?**

Some think the older generation wept because the new foundation was so much smaller and plainer than Solomon's. The prophet Haggai later asked the people who had seen the first temple, "How do you see it now? Isn't it in your eyes as nothing?" Others think they wept from overwhelming emotion, a

mix of grief for what was lost and joy at seeing worship restored after so long. Many people who have been through loss know that feeling: the same moment can bring tears of joy and tears of sorrow at the same time. The writer doesn't criticize either group. He just lets the sounds mingle.

REAL TALK **When Joy and Grief Mix**

Maybe you've had a moment like this. A new beginning that was also an ending. A graduation that meant leaving friends. A move to a new place that meant leaving home. A blended family that was a new start but also a reminder of what was lost. A holiday after someone you love has died. It's okay to feel joy and grief at the same time. You don't have to choose. God is present in both. And if you're with people who are feeling something different from you, give them space. The young shouted, the old wept, and they did it together. If grief is weighing heavily on you, please talk to someone you trust. You don't have to carry it alone.

There's also a lesson here about generations. Older people can remember what was, and that memory is precious. Younger people can see what could be, and that hope is precious too. God's people need both: those who remember and those who dream. The healthiest communities are the ones where young and old worship together, even when they feel different things.

REAL TALK **Building on the Old Foundation**

The exiles didn't pick a new spot for the temple. They built the altar "on its base" and laid the new foundation in the same place as the old. They didn't throw out their history; they built on it. If your faith has been shaken, or you've wandered and want to come back, you don't have to start from nothing. The truths you learned as a kid, the prayers you once prayed, the people who invested in you are all still there, like an old foundation under the rubble. God can use them as you rebuild. Starting over with God isn't starting from zero.

KEY VERSE

They sang to one another in praising and giving thanks to the LORD, "For he is good, for his loving kindness endures forever toward Israel." All the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the LORD's house had been laid.

Ezra 3:11 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the exiles built the altar before anything else?
2. What would it look like for you to put God first when you're stressed or afraid?
3. Why do you think the young people shouted and the old people wept?
4. Have you ever felt joy and grief at the same time? What was that like?

TRY THIS *Talk to an older person in your family or church this week. Ask them what has changed in their lifetime, what they miss, and what they're hopeful about.*

CHAPTER 3

Stalled

Ezra 4–5

Almost as soon as the foundation is laid, trouble begins. "The adversaries of Judah and Benjamin" hear about the building and come to Zerubbabel with an offer. "Let us build with you, for we seek your God as you do; and we have been sacrificing to him since the days of Esar Haddon king of Assyria, who brought us up here."

These were people the Assyrians had resettled in the old northern kingdom generations earlier. If you've read 2 Kings 17, you know that they worshiped the LORD alongside their own gods. Their offer sounds friendly. But the writer has already called them adversaries.

Zerubbabel and the leaders refuse. You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God. We'll build it ourselves, as King Cyrus commanded.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Was Zerubbabel Wrong to Say No?**
>
> Some readers find Zerubbabel's answer harsh. Weren't these people offering to help? Why turn them away? Christians have understood it in a few ways. Many think the leaders recognized that these neighbors' worship was mixed with other gods, and that letting them help shape the temple would bring back the same compromise that had led to exile. The fact that they immediately turned to sabotage suggests their motives weren't pure. Others think the exiles were too exclusive, and note that later prophets like Isaiah looked forward to a temple that would be "a house of prayer for all peoples."

> Both concerns are real. The tension between staying faithful and staying open runs through the whole book.

The response is immediate. “Then the people of the land weakened the hands of the people of Judah, and troubled them in building.” They discourage the builders, frighten them, and even hire officials to work against them in the Persian court. This campaign lasts for years, all through the reign of Cyrus and into the reign of Darius.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Aramaic Letters**
>
> Starting in 4:8, the book of Ezra switches from Hebrew to Aramaic, the official language of the Persian Empire, and it stays in Aramaic until 6:18. These chapters include copies of letters sent to and from the Persian kings. Interestingly, the letters in 4:6\u201323 come from later periods, the reigns of Ahasuerus and Artaxerxes, decades after the temple was finished, and they’re about the city walls, not the temple. The writer groups them together here to show the pattern of opposition God’s people faced again and again. It’s like a history teacher saying, and this kind of thing kept happening for the next seventy years. Then in 4:24, he returns to the story of the temple.

One of these later letters, from a Persian official named Rehum, gives a taste of the accusations. Be it known to the king that the Jews have come to Jerusalem and are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city. If it’s rebuilt, they’ll stop paying taxes, and the king will lose money. Check the records, and you’ll see it’s always been a rebellious city. It’s a smear campaign, mixing a little truth with a lot of fear. And it works. The king orders the work to stop.

Back to the temple story. “Then work stopped on God’s house which is at Jerusalem. It stopped until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.” That was 520 BC. The foundation had been laid in about 536 BC. For roughly sixteen years, the foundation sat there, untouched.

What were the people doing all that time? The prophet Haggai tells us. They were building their own houses. Fine houses, with paneled walls. Haggai brings them God's question: "Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies waste?" And he adds, "Consider your ways." They'd been planting a lot and harvesting little, eating but never full, earning money that seemed to disappear through holes in their pockets.

> **REAL TALK** **When You Lose Momentum**
>
> The exiles started with incredible energy: a dangerous journey, an altar built in fear, a foundation laid with shouting. Then opposition came, and they quit. Not dramatically. They just slowly drifted into focusing on their own lives, and sixteen years went by. That's how a lot of faith stalls. Not with a big rebellion, but with discouragement and distraction. You start reading your Bible, then life gets busy and you stop. You join a group, then it gets awkward and you drift away. You commit to something, then someone criticizes you and you lose heart. If that's you, Haggai's message is for you: consider your ways. It's not too late to pick up where you left off.

Haggai's message has an interesting twist. He tells the people that their struggles, the poor harvests, the money that never stretched far enough, were connected to their neglect of God's house. That doesn't mean every hardship is a punishment for something you did. The Bible is clear that bad things happen to good people too; just read Job. But Haggai's point is that when we put our own comfort first and leave God for later, we often find that the things we chased don't satisfy. We work hard for things that don't last, and we're left feeling empty. Jesus said it this way: seek first God's kingdom, and the other things will be added. Haggai was calling the people to get their priorities back in order.

Then God sends two prophets. "Now the prophets, Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who

were in Judah and Jerusalem." Haggai was probably an older man; he may even have seen the first temple. Zechariah was young. Together, an old prophet and a young prophet stir up the people.

Haggai tells them to go up to the mountains, bring wood, and build the house, and God will take pleasure in it. When people complain that the new temple will be nothing compared to Solomon's, Haggai brings God's encouragement: "Yet now be strong, Zerubbabel," says the LORD. "Be strong, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land," says the LORD, "and work, for I am with you." Zechariah brings a famous promise to Zerubbabel: "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the LORD of Armies.

And it works. Zerubbabel and Jeshua "rose up and began to build God's house which is at Jerusalem; and with them were the prophets of God, helping them." The prophets didn't just preach. They picked up tools.

Almost immediately, a new Persian governor named Tattenai shows up and asks who gave them permission to build. But "the eye of their God was on the elders of the Jews," and the officials don't stop the work while they write to King Darius to check.

The Jews' answer, recorded in Tattenai's letter, is wonderful. "We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth and are building the house that was built these many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished." They honestly admit that their ancestors provoked God and were exiled. And they explain that Cyrus himself authorized the rebuilding. Tattenai asks the king to search the royal archives to see if it's true.

The Persian officials could have simply shut everything down while they waited for a reply. They didn't. The writer gives the credit to God: His eye was on the elders. That's a comforting picture. The returning exiles were small and powerless, surrounded by officials who could ruin them with a single letter. But they weren't invisible. God was watching over them. Whatever you're facing, you're not invisible either. The same God whose eye was on the elders of the Jews sees you.

> **REAL TALK** **Not by Might**
>
> Zechariah's message to Zerubbabel, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit," was perfect for a leader who had no army, little money, and powerful enemies. The temple wouldn't be finished because the people were strong enough or rich enough. It would be finished because God's Spirit was at work. That's good news when you feel weak. Whatever God is calling you to do, you don't have to rely only on your own strength, talent, or popularity. Ask for His help. He loves to work through people who know they need Him.

KEY VERSE

Then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua the son of Jozadak rose up and began to build God's house which is at Jerusalem; and with them were the prophets of God, helping them.

Ezra 5:2 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the opposition worked so well at first?
2. Why do you think the people put their own houses ahead of God's house for so long?
3. Is there something you started for God that has stalled? What would it take to start again?
4. Why do you think God sent both an older prophet and a younger one?

TRY THIS *Pick one thing you used to do to grow closer to God that you've let slide. Restart it this week, even in a small way.*

CHAPTER 4

Finished

Ezra 6

King Darius orders a search of the royal archives. In Babylon, nothing turns up. But in the fortress of Ecbatana, in the province of Media, where the Persian kings spent their summers, officials find a scroll. It's a memo of Cyrus's original decree: "Concerning God's house at Jerusalem, let the house be built." It even gives the measurements and says the royal treasury will pay the costs. The gold and silver vessels Nebuchadnezzar took are to be returned.

Tattenai had hoped to stop the work. Instead, his letter backfires spectacularly. Darius writes back with new orders. "Leave the work of this house of God alone." Not only that, but the costs must be paid in full from the royal taxes of the very region Tattenai governs. The Jews are to be given whatever animals, wheat, salt, wine, and oil they need for sacrifices, every day, without fail, so they can pray for the king and his sons. And anyone who interferes will have a beam pulled from his house and be impaled on it, and his house turned into a garbage heap.

Imagine being Tattenai, reading that reply. He tried to shut down the project, and now he has to pay for it.

REAL TALK **When Opposition Backfires**

The enemies of the Jews spent years trying to stop the temple. In the end, their efforts led to an official royal search that confirmed the Jews' right to build and forced the opposition to fund the project. It's a pattern you'll see throughout the Bible, from Joseph's brothers to the cross: what people mean for harm, God can use for good. Paul wrote, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose." That doesn't mean everything that happens is good, or that opposition won't hurt. It means God is never out of moves. If people are working against you for doing the right thing, keep going. God sees, and He can turn it around.

Tattenai and his officials obey "with all diligence." And with the prophets' encouragement, "the elders of the Jews built and prospered, through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. They built and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the decree of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia." Notice the order. First the command of God. Then the decrees of kings. The kings thought they were in charge, but they were carrying out God's plan.

The temple is finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of Darius, which was the spring of 516 BC. That's about seventy years after Solomon's temple was destroyed in 586 BC. Some scholars think this is another fulfillment of Jeremiah's seventy years: seventy years without a temple.

"The children of Israel, the priests, the Levites, and the rest of the children of the captivity, kept the dedication of this house of God with joy." They offer a hundred bulls, two hundred rams, and four hundred lambs. That's a lot of animals for a poor community, but nothing like the tens of thousands Solomon offered. They also offer a sin offering "for all Israel, twelve male goats, according to the

number of the tribes of Israel." Even though most of the people who had returned were from Judah and Benjamin, they made an offering for all twelve tribes. They hadn't forgotten their scattered brothers and sisters. They still thought of themselves as one family.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Second Temple**

The temple finished in 516 BC is called the Second Temple. It stood for nearly six hundred years, longer than Solomon's temple. It was simpler at first, and it had no ark of the covenant, which was lost when Babylon destroyed Jerusalem. About five hundred years later, King Herod the Great expanded and rebuilt it on a massive scale, making it one of the most impressive buildings in the Roman world. That's the temple Jesus knew. When the New Testament talks about Jesus teaching in the temple, overturning the tables of the money changers, or the veil being torn when He died, it's talking about this temple, the one Zerubbabel's struggling community began. The Romans destroyed it in AD 70. Its western retaining wall, the Western Wall, still stands in Jerusalem today, and Jewish people from all over the world pray there.

Think about who was at that dedication. Some of the old people who had wept at the foundation twenty years earlier might still have been alive, now very old. Some of the young people who had shouted were now middle-aged, with children of their own. A whole generation had grown up during the long stall. Now, finally, they could see the finished building. The temple might not have had Solomon's gold, but it was theirs, built through hardship, opposition, and delay. God had kept His word. There's a particular kind of joy that comes from finishing something hard after a long wait. It's deeper than the joy of an easy win, because you know what it cost.

A few weeks later, on the fourteenth day of the first month, they celebrate the Passover. The priests and Levites have purified themselves, and they slaughter the Passover lambs for everyone.

And there's a significant detail: those who eat it include "the children of Israel who had returned out of the captivity, and all who had separated themselves to them from the filthiness of the nations of the land to seek the LORD, the God of Israel."

That second group matters. These were people who weren't part of the returning exiles, people already living in the land, possibly including some with foreign backgrounds, who chose to turn away from idol worship and join God's people to seek the LORD. And they were welcomed to the Passover table. The door was open to anyone willing to seek God with a whole heart. Hold on to that. It will matter when we get to the end of the book.

They celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread for seven days "with joy; because the LORD had made them joyful, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, to strengthen their hands in the work of God." (Assyria here is probably an old name for the region the Persian king now ruled.) Back in chapter 4, the enemies had weakened the people's hands. Now God has strengthened them. The joy isn't something they manufactured. The LORD made them joyful.

> **REAL TALK** **Finish What You Started**
>
> It took around twenty-two years from the first return to the finished temple, including sixteen years when nothing happened. But they finished. There's something powerful about finishing. Many people start things with enthusiasm and never complete them: projects, commitments, books, practices, friendships. Finishing usually requires pushing through the boring middle, the discouraging setbacks, and the voices telling you to quit. If you have something worth finishing, take the next step today. And if you're helping someone else finish something, be a Haggai or a Zechariah: encourage them and grab a tool.

Notice how Ezra 6 ends: with joy. The word joy, or joyful, shows up again and again in this chapter. After years of fear, discouragement, opposition, and delay, the people finally celebrated. The joy didn't come from having an easy life. They were still poor, still under Persian rule, still surrounded by people who didn't like them. It came from seeing God keep His promise and from worshiping Him together. That's a kind of joy that doesn't depend on circumstances. Nehemiah, a few years later, would tell the people, "the joy of the LORD is your strength."

KEY VERSE

The children of Israel, the priests, the Levites, and the rest of the children of the captivity, kept the dedication of this house of God with joy.

Ezra 6:16 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. How did the opposition's letter end up helping the Jews? Have you ever seen something like that happen?
2. Why do you think the people offered sin offerings for all twelve tribes, even though most of the tribes weren't there?
3. Who was welcomed to the Passover in 6:21? Why does that matter?
4. What's something you've started that you need to finish?

TRY THIS *Choose one unfinished project or commitment. Write down the next small step, and do it within three days.*

CHAPTER 5

Ezra Sets His Heart

Ezra 7–8

Chapter 7 begins with "Now after these things." That little phrase covers almost sixty years. The temple was finished in 516 BC. Ezra arrives in 458 BC, in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes. In between, back in Persia, the events of the book of Esther take place, when a young Jewish woman became queen and helped save her people from destruction.

Now we finally meet the man the book is named after. Ezra comes from a long line of priests, all the way back to Aaron, Moses' brother. The writer lists his family tree to show that he's the real thing. "This Ezra went up from Babylon. He was a skilled scribe in the law of Moses." A scribe was more than someone who copied documents. He was a scholar and teacher of God's law.

The journey from Babylon to Jerusalem takes four months, "according to the good hand of his God on him." And then comes the verse that sums up Ezra's life: "For Ezra had set his heart to seek the LORD's law, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel."

Look at the order. First, seek: Ezra studied God's word. Then, do it: he obeyed what he learned. Then, teach: he shared it with others. Many people get the order wrong. Some study the Bible without

ever letting it change how they live. Some try to teach others what they haven't practiced themselves. Ezra did all three, in the right order, and it all started with his heart.

> **REAL TALK** **Seek, Do, Teach**
>
> Ezra's pattern is a great one for anyone who wants to grow in faith. Seek: read and study God's word, not just once in a while, but with your heart set on it. Do: put what you learn into practice. James wrote, "But be doers of the word, and not only hearers, deluding your own selves." Teach: share what you've learned with others, whether that's a younger sibling, a friend, a small group, or someone who asks you a question. You don't have to be an expert to share what God is teaching you. Start small. Read one chapter. Find one thing to obey. Tell one person.

The writer includes a copy of the letter Artaxerxes gave Ezra, again in Aramaic. The king authorizes any Israelite in his empire who wants to go to Jerusalem to go with Ezra. He sends silver and gold for sacrifices, gives Ezra access to the royal treasury, frees the temple workers from taxes, and appoints Ezra to set up judges who know God's law and to "teach him who doesn't know them." The king even seems a little nervous about God's anger: "Whatever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be done exactly for the house of the God of heaven; for why should there be wrath against the realm of the king and his sons?"

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Why Would Artaxerxes Help?**
>
> Persian kings often supported local religions in their empire, partly to keep the peace and partly out of genuine respect or fear of local gods. Artaxerxes I also had practical reasons to want a stable, loyal province in Judah, since Egypt, just to the south, was in revolt around this time. A well-organized Jewish community governed by its own law would be good for the empire. But Ezra sees God's hand behind it all. Kings have their reasons, and God has His.

Ezra's heart was set before he ever left Babylon. That's important. He didn't become a man of God's word when he arrived in Jerusalem and got an important job. He spent years in exile studying, practicing, and preparing, in a foreign land where no one was handing out awards for knowing the law of Moses. By the time the king gave him an assignment, Ezra was ready. A lot of what God does in a person's life happens in hidden seasons of preparation. The habits you build now, when no one is watching, shape who you'll be when the opportunity comes. You don't become faithful overnight. You become faithful one ordinary day at a time.

At this point, the book shifts into first person. Ezra starts telling his own story. His first words are praise. "Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who has put such a thing as this in the king's heart." He says he took courage because the LORD's hand was on him, and he gathered leaders to go with him.

Think about how many people are part of this journey who never get famous. The leaders of families who agreed to go. The Levites who were recruited at the last minute. The temple servants. The mothers carrying small children on a four-month trek. The priests who carried the gold and silver the whole way and had to account for every ounce at the end. Ezra gets the book named after him, but none of it would have happened without hundreds of ordinary people saying yes. God's work is always a team effort.

Ezra gathers the travelers at a canal called the Ahava, and they camp there for three days. While reviewing the group, he notices a problem. There are no Levites. Remember, the Levites were the ones who served in the temple. Ezra sends a team to a place called Casiphia to recruit some, and they come back with about forty

Levites and 220 temple servants. Even then, recruiting people to give up their lives in Babylon to serve in Jerusalem wasn't easy.

Then Ezra faces a dilemma. The road from Babylon to Jerusalem was dangerous, and they were carrying a fortune in gold and silver. The normal thing would be to ask the king for an armed escort. But Ezra had already told the king, "The hand of our God is on all those who seek him, for good." Now he says, "For I was ashamed to ask of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy on the way." He had talked a big game about God's protection, and he didn't want to look like he didn't believe it.

So instead, he does something else. "Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a straight way for us, for our little ones, and for all our possessions." The whole group, including families with small children, stops eating and prays. "So we fasted and begged our God for this, and he granted our request."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Was It Wrong to Ask for an Escort?**

Thirteen years later, when Nehemiah traveled to Jerusalem, he accepted a royal escort of army officers and horsemen, and the Bible doesn't criticize him for it. So it's not that asking for help is a lack of faith. Ezra's situation was specific: he had publicly declared that God would protect those who sought Him, and he wanted his actions to match his words. Both men trusted God. One showed it by accepting help, the other by going without. The lesson isn't that one approach is always right. It's that your actions should match what you say you believe.

REAL TALK **Fasting and Praying**

Fasting means choosing to go without food, or sometimes something else, for a period of time in order to focus on God and pray. In the Bible, people fasted when they faced big decisions, danger, grief, or a need for God's help. Jesus fasted, and He assumed His followers would too. If you want to try it, start

> small. You might skip one meal or give up something like social media for a day, and use that time to pray. If you have any health conditions, or if you've ever struggled with eating or with your body image, please don't fast from food; talk to a parent, doctor, or trusted adult first, and choose something else to give up instead. Fasting isn't about earning God's favor. It's about humbling yourself and making room to seek Him.

Before they leave, Ezra carefully weighs out the silver, gold, and precious vessels and puts twelve leading priests in charge of them, saying, you are holy to the LORD, and so are these things. Guard them until you weigh them out again in Jerusalem. He was trusting God, but he was also being responsible. Faith and wisdom go together.

They leave the Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month. "The hand of our God was on us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy and the bandits by the way." They arrive safely in Jerusalem. Everything is weighed and recorded, and every ounce is accounted for. Then the returning exiles offer sacrifices: twelve bulls for all Israel, and twelve male goats as a sin offering. Once again, all twelve tribes are remembered.

Ezra's arrival marks a turning point in the history of God's people. Before the exile, Israel's life centered on the temple, the priests, and the king. After the exile, there was no king, and the people were scattered across many lands. What held them together increasingly was the word of God: reading it, studying it, teaching it, and living by it. Jewish tradition remembers Ezra as the one who helped make that shift. He is often honored as a second Moses, the man who brought the Torah back to the center of the people's lives. Many traditions credit him with gathering and organizing the Scriptures.

The synagogue, where Jesus would later read and teach, grew out of this focus on God's word.

KEY VERSE

For Ezra had set his heart to seek the LORD's law, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel.

Ezra 7:10 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the order of Ezra's priorities matters: seek, then do, then teach?
2. Which of the three is hardest for you right now?
3. Why was Ezra ashamed to ask the king for soldiers? Do you think he made the right choice?
4. Have you ever fasted or given something up to focus on God? What was it like?

TRY THIS *Use Ezra's pattern this week. Read one passage of the Bible, pick one thing to put into practice, and share what you learned with one person.*

CHAPTER 6

The Hard Ending

Ezra 9–10

Ezra has only been in Jerusalem a few months when some of the leaders come to him with a report. The people, including priests and Levites, have married women from the surrounding peoples, peoples whose practices the law of Moses called detestable. And the leaders and officials have been the worst offenders.

Ezra's reaction is intense. He tears his clothes, pulls out hair from his head and beard, and sits down in shock. People who tremble at God's word gather around him, and he sits there, stunned, until the evening sacrifice.

Then he gets up, falls on his knees, spreads out his hands to God, and prays one of the most honest prayers of confession in the Bible. "My God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have increased over our head, and our guiltiness has grown up to the heavens."

Notice that Ezra says we and our. He didn't commit this sin himself, but he identifies with his people. He doesn't stand above them pointing fingers. He kneels with them.

He remembers their history: since the days of our ancestors, we have been guilty, and that's why we were handed over to foreign kings, to the sword, to exile, and to shame. Then he remembers

God's grace. "Now for a little moment grace has been shown from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape." "For we are bondservants; yet our God has not forsaken us in our bondage." God had moved the kings of Persia to let them rebuild. And now, after all that, he asks, shall we break Your commandments again? He ends with no excuses at all. "Behold, we are before you in our guiltiness; for no one can stand before you because of this."

While Ezra is praying and weeping in front of the temple, a huge crowd of men, women, and children gathers around him, and they weep bitterly too. Then a man named Shecaniah speaks up. We have been unfaithful to our God. "Yet now there is hope for Israel concerning this thing." He proposes that the men make a covenant to send away their foreign wives and the children born to them. "Arise, for the matter belongs to you and we are with you. Be courageous, and do it."

Ezra makes the leaders swear to do it. A proclamation goes out: all the returned exiles must gather in Jerusalem within three days, or lose their property and their place in the community. They gather in the square in front of the temple, trembling, in the pouring rain of winter. Ezra tells them they have been unfaithful and must separate from the peoples of the land and from their foreign wives. The assembly agrees, but asks for time, since it's raining and there are many cases. A few men oppose the plan. Over the next three months, the leaders investigate each case. The book ends with a list of the men who had married foreign women, and its final sentence is quiet and painful: "Some of them had wives by whom they had children."

That's how Ezra ends. No celebration. No neat conclusion. Just a list of names and a hint of the heartbreak behind them.

REAL TALK **A Hard Passage**

This is one of the most difficult passages in the Old Testament, and it deserves careful thought. First, it's important to understand what the concern was. It was not about race or ethnicity. The law of Moses warned Israel not to marry people from the nations around them because "that would turn away your sons from following me, that they may serve other gods." The issue was idolatry. Israel's history had proven the danger: Solomon's foreign wives turned his heart to other gods, and Ahab's marriage to Jezebel brought Baal worship to Israel. The exile had come because of idolatry, and this tiny, fragile community was terrified of losing its faith again. And foreigners who turned to the LORD were welcomed. Rahab the Canaanite and Ruth the Moabite both joined Israel, and both are named in the family tree of Jesus. Even in Ezra 6, people from the land who separated themselves from idolatry to seek the LORD were welcomed to the Passover. Second, Christians and scholars disagree about how to evaluate what Ezra did. Some believe this was a necessary, God-honoring act of repentance for that specific moment, preserving the community that would one day bring the Messiah into the world. Others believe it was a painful human overreaction. They note that the plan came from Shecaniah, not from a word of the LORD; that the law forbade new intermarriages but never commanded divorcing existing spouses; that some men objected; and that around the same time, the prophet Malachi condemned men who "dealt treacherously" with their wives and recorded God saying, "One who hates and divorces," "covers his garment with violence!" Still others believe the right answer is somewhere in between: the concern was right, but the cost was tragic. In the New Testament, Paul gives very different instructions to believers married to unbelievers: "if any brother has an unbelieving wife, and she is content to live with him, let him not leave her." Most Christians today agree that Ezra 10 is a description of what happened in a unique situation, not a command for believers today. Talk this through with your family and church.

> **SAFETY NOTE** **If Your Family Is Divorced or Mixed-Faith**
>
> If your parents are divorced, or if one parent follows Jesus and the other doesn't, this chapter might be hard to read. Please hear this: you are not a mistake. Your family's story doesn't make you any less loved by God or any less welcome in His family. Paul wrote that children in mixed-faith families are "holy," set apart and loved by God. Divorce is painful, and if it's happened in your family, it's okay to feel sad, angry, or confused about it. It is never your fault. If you're struggling with your family situation, please talk to a trusted adult, a pastor, school counselor, or relative. And if you're ever in danger at home, call 911, or call or text the Childhelp hotline at 1-800-422-4453. If you're feeling hopeless, call or text 988. God promises, "I will in no way leave you, neither will I in any way forsake you."

It's also worth noticing what Ezra did not do. He didn't round people up or punish them in anger. He prayed, wept, and confessed. The people came to him. The plan came from one of them, and the leaders took time to investigate each case individually instead of acting all at once. Some scholars point out that the list at the end is relatively short, around a hundred names, suggesting that many marriages may have been examined and found acceptable, perhaps because the wives had turned to the LORD, as Ruth had. We don't know for sure. But the slow, careful process is a reminder that even in a painful situation, the community tried to act with deliberation rather than rage.

So what do we take from this hard ending? Maybe this: the people of Ezra's day took sin seriously. When they realized they were drifting back toward the same compromise that had destroyed their nation, they didn't shrug it off. They grieved, confessed, and acted. Whether or not you think they acted rightly in every detail, their seriousness about following God is a challenge to a culture that often takes sin lightly.

And maybe this too: the Old Testament doesn't pretend to have all the answers. Ezra ends unresolved, with a broken community trying to be faithful and not fully succeeding. Nehemiah, which picks up the same story, shows that the problem came back again a few years later. The law, the temple, and even the most dedicated leaders couldn't fully change the human heart. God's people needed something more.

> **REAL TALK** **Who Influences Your Heart?**
>
> The real issue in Ezra 9 wasn't who people married. It was what would happen to their faith. That's still an important question. The people closest to you, your friends, the people you date, and someday perhaps the person you marry, will shape your heart more than almost anyone else. Paul warned believers, "Don't be unequally yoked with unbelievers," which many Christians understand as wise advice for choosing a spouse who shares your faith. That doesn't mean you can't be friends with people who believe differently. Jesus was a friend to all kinds of people. But it's worth asking whether the relationships closest to your heart are helping you follow God or pulling you away from Him.

The book of Ezra ends with a problem, but the Bible doesn't. The story continues in Nehemiah, where the walls are rebuilt, Ezra reads God's law to the whole people, and they make a new covenant. And it continues beyond that, through the prophets and the long centuries of waiting, until a child is born in Bethlehem to a family of David's line. The struggle in Ezra 9 and 10 was ultimately about keeping God's people faithful long enough for His promise to arrive. When it did, that promise opened the door wide: in Jesus, people from every nation are welcomed into God's family, not by abandoning their families, but by turning to Him.

KEY VERSE

For we are bondservants; yet our God has not forsaken us in our bondage, but has extended loving kindness to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to revive us, to set up the house of our God, and to repair its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem.

Ezra 9:9 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Ezra prayed "we" and "our" when he hadn't committed the sin himself?
2. Why was the community so afraid of intermarriage? How does knowing their history help you understand it?
3. Do you think Ezra's response was right, wrong, or somewhere in between? Why?
4. Who are the people most influencing your heart right now?

TRY THIS *Read Ezra 9:5–15 slowly, and write your own prayer of confession for yourself and for your community, using "we" like Ezra did.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

Ezra tells the story of the Second Temple, a smaller, humbler building than Solomon's, finished by a struggling community of returned exiles. The old men wept when they saw its foundation. But the prophet Haggai made a startling promise about it: "'The latter glory of this house will be greater than the former,' says the LORD of Armies." How could a plain building be more glorious than Solomon's golden temple?

Jewish readers honor Ezra as a second Moses, the great scribe who taught the Torah and helped shape the life of God's people around Scripture for centuries to come. The New Testament writers, who were Jewish themselves, saw Haggai's promise come true in a way no one expected. Centuries later, in that same Second Temple, an old man named Simeon took a baby in his arms and said, "for my eyes have seen your salvation." That baby, Jesus, would teach in the temple's courts and say, "one greater than the temple is here." He would speak of His own body as the true temple: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." And through Him, the walls that divided people would come down. Paul wrote that in Jesus, people from every nation are "no longer strangers and foreigners," but are being "built together for a habitation of God in the Spirit." The God who built again in Ezra's day is still building.

Here's what the Bible says about where that story leads, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He loves you. He gives second chances, and He's in the business of rebuilding.

> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (WEB)**

2 We've all sinned.

Ezra prayed that his people's guilt had grown up to the heavens. The Bible says all of us have sinned.

> *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;* **Romans 3:23 (WEB)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. Exile was the cost of Israel's sin. The Bible says its result is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (WEB)**

4 Jesus is the true temple.

Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again. In Him, God lives among His people, and the way home is open.

> *In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.* **1 John 4:10 (WEB)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

The exiles didn't earn their way home; a king's decree set them free. Salvation is a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast.*
> **Ephesians 2:8–9 (WEB)**

6 Come home.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal life.

> *that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
> **Romans 10:9 (WEB)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've sinned against You, and I can't fix that myself. Thank You for giving second chances and for rebuilding what's broken. Thank You that Jesus gave His life for me, and that You raised Him from the dead. Forgive me, and build my life on Him. Help me set my heart to seek Your word, to do it, and to share it. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want Him to be my King. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Ezra 3 and 7, then Haggai 2, and Luke 2, where Simeon meets Jesus in the Second Temple.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Seek, do, teach. Like Ezra, start a habit of reading God's word, practicing one thing you learn, and sharing it with someone else.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Ezra's people stalled for sixteen years before they finished what they started. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Ezra is right, the God who built again from ruins is still building, and He can build something new in you.

Those who sow in tears will reap in joy.

Psalm 126:5 (WEB)