

COMEBACK

GOD'S PROVIDENCE IN MOTION

EZRA & ESTHER

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Editor: Alex Bauman

Comeback: God's Providence in Motion, Ezra & Esther
Adult Bible Study Leader's Guide

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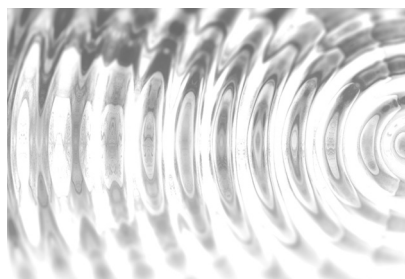
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How to Use *Truth for Living*

Truth for Living:

A comprehensive, trustworthy curriculum that presents the truth of God's Word without compromise. The curriculum plan includes through-the-Bible courses as well as topical courses. Perfect for adults who want a guide in using all of God's Word as God intended.

As you prepare to teach these lessons, keep these two factors in mind:

- The FOCUS of productive adult Bible learning is the learner. The intent of teaching is not teaching, but learning—the learner's learning.
- The GOAL of productive adult Bible learning is an appropriate life-response to Biblical truth. You do not teach simply to impart information; you teach so that the Holy Spirit of God can use the truths of the Word of God to change the child of God into the image of the Son of God.

The Lesson Plan

Each *Truth for Living* lesson has three distinct parts. GETTING STARTED is the attention-getter. The questions and activities “set the table,” as it were, for the study. SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES is the heart of the lesson. A series of study questions leads the teacher and learners through the Biblical text. MAKING IT PERSONAL applies the truth to life.

As is true of any teaching experience, you can adapt the parts of the lesson to fit your particular class. You may choose to alter the beginning activities or change the focus of the application.

The Study Book

This leader's guide is designed to accompany the Bible study book. We encourage you to distribute Bible study books to your learners. Urge them to complete the study before class. The more your learners have studied on their own, the better the class discussions will be. Most of the questions in the leader's guide are picked up from the Bible study book. You will notice the question numbers in parentheses after the questions. The answers to the questions are in italics following the questions.

Other Resources

The resource CD has PowerPoint presentations for every lesson. They incorporate the resource visuals and provide a good way for teachers and learners to track the lesson. Other resources include lesson outlines and verse cards.

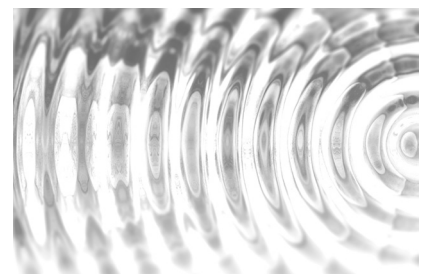
Preface

On occasion each of us has questioned, Where is God, and what is He up to? When everything around us seems unsettled and uncertain, we try to discern His plans and discover His presence. We may even doubt His providential care or fail to discern His comforting presence. At such times we need to hear the message of the books of Ezra and Esther: God is in control! This truth will encourage our hearts, instruct our minds, and develop our faith. We will learn, as Israel learned, that God is present even when we think He isn't. He hasn't abandoned us or forgotten us. He does care, and He knows what He is doing.

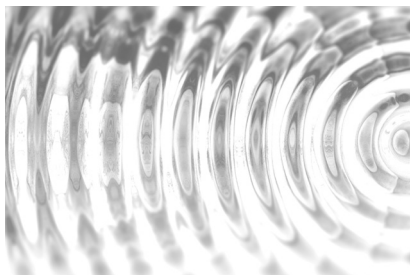
We need a fresh reminder of this great truth: God is faithful to His promises. He had foretold the seventy-year captivity of His people and had predicted with clockwork accuracy their release from captivity and return to Judah. In Ezra and Esther, we see Him providentially protecting and providing for His people while accomplishing His plan. Though He is invisible, God is invincible. In the ordinary events of everyday life, His work moves like ripples across a pond. His purposes are sure, and His plan is sound. Nothing could stop the *Comeback* God set in motion.

As we unfold this truth through the study of these Old Testament books, we will discover a variety of means God used to accomplish His purposes. Consider a few of the people and events He employed: pagan kings and their decrees; courageous exiles; the rebuilding of God's temple; Ezra, a dedicated scribe; the historical archives of the Persian kingdom; the insomnia of a king; the insubordination of a queen; and the beauty and courage of a young Jewish woman. These elements serve to remind us that God cares for His people. He has not abandoned them.

The impact of this study can be life-changing. It will alter our perspective on the providence of God, anchor our hope in the promises of God, and imbed our faith in the Person of God. It will lead us to perceive Him at work in our world and life today. It will prompt us to praise Him for His continual care and protective presence. It will persuade us to place our trust and confidence in Him as He works out His purposes for His glory and our good. God is there. Let us discern His presence, depend on His promises, and serve Him with courageous faith.



Trusting God's Promises



Topic

God's promises

Theme

God keeps His promises.

Desired Learner Response

The learner will take one positive action this week to demonstrate his belief that God keeps His promises.

Materials

- Resources 1–3
- Index cards
- Paper
- Pencils

Scripture Focus

Ezra 1; 2

Summary

After seventy years of captivity, the Jews returned home. The return occurred because God had promised it and then kept His word by prompting King Cyrus of Persia to decree the return. Cyrus provided generous help that facilitated the long journey home.

Outline

- I. God's Promises (Josh. 24:20; 2 Chron. 36:15, 16; Jer. 32:37–44)
 - A. God's promises of discipline (Josh. 24:20; 2 Chron. 36:15, 16)
 - B. God's promises of restoration (Jer. 32:37–44)
- II. God's Power to Keep His Promises (Ezra 1:1–5)
- III. God's Provision for His Promises (Ezra 1:6–11)
- IV. The Recipients of God's Promises (Ezra 2)
 - A. The list of returnees (2:1–67)
 - B. The liberality of the returnees (2:68–70)

Memory Verse

"Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust" (2 Peter 1:4).

GETTING STARTED

Use one of the following activities to get your learners thinking about trusting God to keep His promises.

Credibility Rating

Give each learner an index card and a pencil.

ASK: Record on your index card an occupation you believe is the *least trustworthy*. Then record the main reason for such lack of trust. On the reverse side of the card, identify an occupation you believe is the *most trustworthy* and the main reason for such great trust.

Collect the index cards and read several responses. Explain that unlike humans who violate our trust, God always keeps His word.

Faithful Promise Keepers

ASK: Describe someone you know who faithfully keeps his or her promises (Q1)

ASK: What if God were only as reliable as the person you described? How would that change your life? (Q2)

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

Israel's history recorded a bleak chapter when Assyria carried the Northern Kingdom into captivity and another bleak chapter when Babylon dragged the Southern Kingdom into captivity. However, the Babylonian captivity didn't take God by surprise. He had planned it to chasten His people, for they had become idolatrous and had violated His sabbaths (2 Chron. 7:19–22; 36:20, 21). Yet He displayed His grace and faithfulness by restoring His captive people to their homeland. The book of Ezra stands as a testimonial to the truth that God keeps His word.

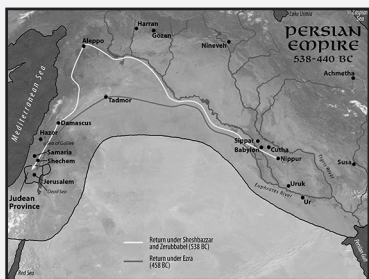
RESOURCE: Display resource 2 to show the land of Israel's captivity in relation to the Promised Land.

TIMELINE: The PowerPoint includes a timeline for the books of Ezra and Esther. Consider printing the slide for your learners to tuck into their Bibles.

I. God's Promises (Josh. 24:20; 2 Chron. 36:15, 16; Jer. 32:37–44)

A. God's promises of discipline (Josh. 24:20; 2 Chron. 36:15, 16)

God always keeps His promises. That is a tremendously encouraging thought. However, not all of God's promises are promises of blessing. Some of His promises are promises of discipline. If God's people don't serve and obey Him, He has prom-



ised to discipline them to draw them back to Himself.

God made His promises of discipline clear to Israel. The people couldn't claim ignorance when God fulfilled His promises to discipline them for their disobedience.

READ: Joshua 24:20. **ASK:** What did God promise the Israelites through Joshua? (Q3) *That if they forsook Him and served strange gods after He had been good to them, He would do them harm and consume them.*

READ: 2 Chronicles 36:15; Hebrews 12:5, 6. **ASK:** What encouraging truth is brought out in these passages? *God's warnings and promises of discipline are motivated by His love and compassion for His people.*

ASK: How does God warn believers today? *Primarily through His Word, but also through the examples of others.*

God has promised to discipline us as His children when we disobey Him. His discipline should cause us to have a respectful fear for Him. It should also reassure us of His love for us. God loves us enough to go after us and discipline us when we wander, or dive, into sin.

READ: 2 Chronicles 36:15, 16. **ASK:** Summarize how the Israelites responded to the warnings that God graciously sent them. (Q4) *They mocked God's messengers who gave the warning, despised God's words or warning, and abused and mocked His prophets.*

READ: 2 Chronicles 36:17–21; Jeremiah 25:1–11 (the words of Jeremiah referenced in 2 Chronicles 36:21).

God is faithful both to His promises to bless and to discipline. His people learned that the hard way.

During their seventy years of captivity, devout Jews longed to return to their homeland and to Jerusalem, its capital. They would never feel at home in Babylon! Psalm 137:1–6 records that the Jews felt distraught and homesick in captivity.

READ: Psalm 137:1–6. **ASK:** Describe the mood of the Jews in Babylon. (Q5) *They missed Jerusalem, so their mood was sad. They were determined not to forget Jerusalem.*

ASK: What did they ask God to do to them if they forgot Jerusalem? (Q6) *Make their tongues stick to the roofs of their mouths.*

B. God's promises of restoration (Jer. 32:37–44)

God's goal in disciplining His people—whether the Israelites in the Old Testament or believers today—isn't to destroy them, but to ultimately restore them. In fact, God promises restoration to those who turn back to Him.

God never left Israel without hope (Jer. 31:17). Even before Israel was led captive, God promised the people that He would restore them to the Promised Land.

No doubt the captives clung to God's promises of future grace and mercy.

READ: Jeremiah 32:37–44. **ASK:** What promises did God give to Israel through Jeremiah? (Q7) *To gather them together and keep them in the land (32:38, 43, 44); to be their God, Whom they fear and are faithful to (32:39, 40); to make an everlasting covenant with them to keep them safe and do them good (32:40–42).*

ASK: What promise or promises are you waiting for the Lord to fulfill? (Q8)

ASK: How can you be sure the Lord will keep His promises? Refer learners to Titus 1:2. (Q9) *Because He cannot lie.*

Eventually the cloud of despair over the captive Jews lifted. In 538 BC, the first year of Cyrus's reign over the expanded Medo-Persian Empire, Cyrus issued a decree permitting Jewish captives to leave Babylon and return to Judah. This action was in keeping with his humanitarian policy of restoring displaced people to their homelands. But Cyrus wasn't acting alone; God was using His power behind the scenes to fulfill His promise to restore Israel.

II. God's Power to Keep His Promises (Ezra 1:1–5)

About two hundred years before Cyrus was born, God identified him by name as the initiator of the return of God's people from captivity. Through the prophet Isaiah, God announced that Cyrus "is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid" (Isa. 44:28).

Cyrus believed that the God of the Jews had been good to him, having given him a vast kingdom. He believed God had also given him the responsibility to build His temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 1:2). Therefore, he gave his Jewish captives permission to return to Jerusalem to undertake the project (1:3).

It is encouraging to know that God "stirred up the spirit of Cyrus" to decree the Jews' return home (1:1). Without God's working, Cyrus would have never made such a decree.

READ: Proverbs 21:1. **ASK:** How does this verse portray the power of God? (Q10) *As being able to turn the direction of a river's waters or a king's heart.*

The power God unleashed to fulfill His promises concerning Israel's return from Captivity hasn't diminished; God is still "able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think" (Eph. 3:20).

ASK: How might a believer strengthen his or her confidence in God's power to keep His promises? (Q11) *Read and study Bible passages that describe or illustrate God's power; read biographies of believers who saw God do mighty things in their lives; review what God has already done in his own life.*

Cyrus's decree didn't obligate the Jews to leave Babylon; it merely encouraged them to leave if they wanted to do so. Undoubtedly, many Jews had settled down in Babylon in response to Jeremiah's advice to "build ye houses, and dwell in

In His prophetic words to Cyrus in Isaiah 45:5, God declared, "Thou hast not known me." At best, Cyrus's description of God in Ezra 1:2 and 3 merely confirms that he perceived God as One Who occupied a high position among other gods. Apparently he had become acquainted with the prophecies about his role in the Jews' repatriation and the rebuilding of the temple and gladly complied with them.

them; and plant gardens, and eat the fruit of them” (Jer. 29:5). It would have been easier to stay in Babylon than to pull up stakes and travel about nine hundred miles over unfamiliar terrain to Jerusalem, which lay in ruins and was vulnerable to local enemies. Nevertheless, many elected to place the future in God’s hands. He had stirred their spirits to go, just as He had stirred the spirit of Cyrus to provide the opportunity.

III. God’s Provision for His Promises (Ezra 1:6–11)

As directed by Cyrus, the people of his empire—both Gentiles and Jews—gave liberally to those who would soon embark on the long journey home (Ezra 1:6). Clearly God was working in many hearts to make this part of the mission successful. God had opened the door and was providing the way.

READ: Ezra 1:6. **ASK:** How common is it for people to willingly give away their money and goods? (Q12) *Those who gave toward the endeavor, particularly the Gentiles, were doing so because God was directing them to do so. God was using them to provide for the needs of the returnees.*

Acting generously and in good faith, Cyrus restored to the Jews the golden vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the Lord’s temple and placed in the temple of his heathen god (1:7; see 2 Chron. 36:17, 18).

Cyrus placed his treasurer, Mithredath, in charge of the project. All the vessels were counted and delivered to “Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah” (Ezra 1:8). In all, fifty-four hundred gold vessels from the temple were placed in Sheshbazzar’s custody for safe delivery to Jerusalem (1:9–11).

God didn’t expect His people to figure out how to get to Israel on their own. He promised that they would return to the Promised Land, and He provided the way for them to get there. They could trust Him. So can we. When God promises to guide us through life, He will also provide for us along the way.

IV. The Recipients of God’s Promises (Ezra 2)

A person who obeys God may be a virtual unknown in the eyes of others, but he is known to God and valued by Him. The book of Ezra contains not only the names of rulers, priests, and prophets, but also the names of rank-and-file Jewish exiles that left Babylon to return to Judah, the land of their spiritual roots.

A. The list of returnees (2:1–67)

Zerubbabel led the expedition from Babylon to Jerusalem in 538 BC (2:2). According to the record, 42,360 exiles made the journey (2:64). They took along 7,337 servants, 200 singers, 736 horses, 245 mules, 435 camels, and 6,720 donkeys (2:65–67).

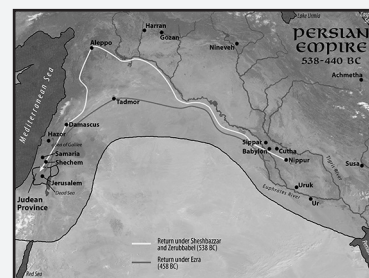
ASK: Do you think the singers sang as the returnees traveled to Jerusalem? If so, what do you think they sang about? (Q13)

ASK: What do you think characterized the mood of their songs? (Q14)

RESOURCE: Display resource 2 as you refer to the return under Zerubbabel.

Daniel 1:2 mentions that Nebuchadnezzar had placed these sacred vessels in the house of his god. Nebuchadnezzar worshiped Merodach, also known as Bel or Baal.

Ezra 2:1 identifies the returnees as “the children of the province.” They were from Judah, which at the time was considered a province of Persia. Since refugees from the Northern Kingdom had moved into the Southern Kingdom before the Captivity, all twelve tribes must have been represented in this return to Judah. Verse 70 mentions “all Israel.” This designation also appears in Ezra 6:17 and 8:35. Ezra arrived in Jerusalem about eighty years later, in 458 BC.



The Urim and Thummim, meaning “lights and perfections,” were kept in the high priest’s breastplate. Somehow the Urim and Thummim revealed God’s will to the high priest (Exod. 28:30; Num. 27:21).

The 61,000 drams, or drachmas, of gold and 5,000 minas of silver equaled about 1,100 pounds of gold and three tons of silver.

The list of returnees begins with the names of their leaders (2:1, 2). Most prominent among the leaders were Zerubbabel and Jeshua (Joshua). Zerubbabel later served in Judah as the returnees’ political leader, and Jeshua served as their high priest. “Nehemiah” and “Mordecai” mentioned in verse 2 were not the Nehemiah who rebuilt Jerusalem’s walls and the Mordecai who was related to Queen Esther. However, like those two better-known men, they were men of faith and vision.

The names and numbering of families come next in the list (2:3–35), but at verse 20, the categorizing changes from heads of families to cities.

Priests, Levites, Nethinim, and descendants of Solomon’s servants were also numbered (2:36–58). Even those who had lost track of their genealogies were numbered and listed (2:59–61). However, no one with an uncertain genealogy was permitted to serve as a priest (2:62, 63). Zerubbabel had hoped that someday a high priest would use the Urim and Thummim to determine these genealogies, but that never occurred.

B. The liberality of the returnees (2:68–70)

A sorry sight greeted the returnees when they reached the temple site. Once a glorious structure, the temple was nothing but rubble—stark witness to the Babylonians’ ferocious destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC—but the returnees had faith and vision. They envisioned a rebuilt temple with the worship of Jehovah restored. And they were willing to give and to work to accomplish those goals.

Reaching into their hearts and digging into their pockets, heads of families gave generously to the building project. They presented offerings of gold, silver, and one hundred priestly garments (2:68, 69).

ASK: What kind of an offering would you expect from the returnees shortly after they arrived in Israel and found neither places to live nor cultivated cropland? (Q15) *A small offering given with hesitation.*

ASK: What did the Jews demonstrate by their generous giving? (Q16) *Trust God.*

The returnees, representing all Israel, were back in their homeland (2:70). God had kept His promise about bringing them home after the Captivity. He had provided safety during the long journey, and He had enabled them to give liberally for the reconstruction of the temple. But challenging days lay ahead, and the returnees would need God’s help again and again. Thankfully the treasury of God’s grace, mercy, and love is always full.

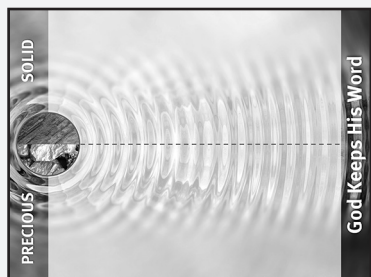
MAKING IT PERSONAL

Testimony

ASK: How has knowing God is faithful to His promises affected your life? (Q17)

Similes

RESOURCE: Display resource 3. Have volunteers create similes that describe



the dependability of God’s promises. Make the following statements, and have volunteers complete them. Record answers on the resource. (Q18)

“God’s word is as solid as . . . ”

“God’s word is as precious as . . . ”

Pledge to Act

Distribute paper and pencils. Instruct each learner to write a pledge that begins, “Because God keeps His word, I will . . . ” (Q19)

Summary and Memory Verse

Use resource 1 to review the response for this lesson: Trust God’s promises.

Encourage your learners to memorize 2 Peter 1:4. Give them an opportunity to quote the verse in class next week.

