

COMEBACK

GOD'S PROVIDENCE IN MOTION

EZRA & ESTHER

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The Doctrinal Basis of Our Curriculum

A more detailed statement with references is available upon request.

- The verbal, plenary inspiration of the Scriptures
- Only one true God
- The Trinity of the Godhead
- The Holy Spirit and His ministry
- The personality of Satan
- The Genesis account of creation
- Original sin and the fall of man
- The virgin birth of Christ
- Salvation through faith in the shed blood of Christ
- The bodily resurrection and priesthood of Christ
- Grace and the new birth
- Justification by faith
- Sanctification of the believer
- The security of the believer
- The church
- The ordinances of the local church: baptism by immersion and the Lord's Supper
- Biblical separation—ecclesiastical and personal
- Obedience to civil government
- The place of Israel
- The pretribulation rapture of the church
- The premillennial return of Christ
- The millennial reign of Christ
- Eternal glory in Heaven for the righteous
- Eternal torment in Hell for the wicked

Alex Bauman, editor

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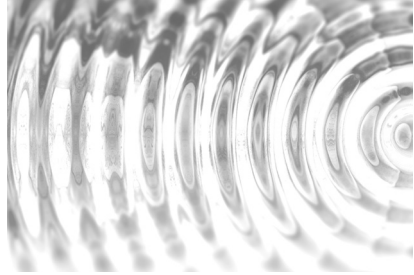
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Preface

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.

This study will alter your perspective on the providence of God, anchor your hope in the promises of God, and imbed your faith in the Person of God. It will lead you to perceive Him at work in your world and life today. It will prompt you to praise Him for His continual care and protective presence. It will persuade you to place your trust and confidence in Him as He works out His purposes for His glory and your good. God is there. Discern His presence, depend on His promises, and serve Him with courageous faith.

Trusting God's Promises

Scripture Focus

Ezra 1; 2

Theme

God Keeps His Promises

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

Imagine you are lying in a hospital bed and are being prepped for open-heart surgery when a nurse comes in and says, "I'm sorry, we'll have to reschedule your surgery for tomorrow. The doctor didn't show up today as he had promised he would." Most likely your next words would be something like, "Get me out of here!" When our lives are at stake, we want someone who is faithful and trustworthy.

No one has been making promises longer than God has. From eternity past, God has been faithful to His word. His history is spotless and unmatched. He is completely trustworthy. This study steps into a low point in Israel's history, recorded in the book of Ezra, and finds God's people in captivity nine hundred miles from Jerusalem. But their days got brighter, for their sovereign God was on the move and was about to show Himself faithful once again. His people would go home to the Promised Land for the first time in seventy years.

1. Describe someone you know who faithfully keeps his or her promises.

2. What if God were only as reliable as the person you described? How would that change your life?

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.

God's Promises of Discipline

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 promised 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.

3. Read Joshua 24:20. What did God promise the Israelites through Joshua?

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.

4. Read 2 Chronicles 36:15, 16. Summarize how the Israelites responded to the warnings that God graciously sent them.

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.

5. Read Psalm 137:1–6. Describe the mood of the Jews in Babylon.

6. What did they ask God to do to them if they forgot Jerusalem?

God's Promises of Restoration

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.

7. Read Jeremiah 32:37–44. What promises did God give to Israel through Jeremiah?

8. What promise or promises are you waiting for the Lord to fulfill?

9. How can you be sure the Lord will keep His promises? (See Titus 1:2.)

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.

God's Power to Keep His Promises

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.

10. Read Proverbs 21:1. How does this verse portray the power of God?

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).

11. How might a believer strengthen his or her confidence in God's power to keep His promises?

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 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.

God's Provision for His Promises

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.

12. Read Ezra 1:6. How common is it for people to willingly give away their money and goods?

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.

The Recipients of God’s Promises

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.

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).

13. Do you think the singers sang as the returnees traveled to Jerusalem? If so, what do you think they sang about?

14. What do you think characterized the mood of their songs?

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.

The Liberality of the Returnees

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).

15. 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?

16. What did the Jews demonstrate by their generous giving?

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

17. How has knowing God is faithful to His promises affected your life?

18. Finish the following phrases:

“God’s word is as solid as . . .”

“God’s word is as precious as . . .”

19. Write a pledge that begins, “Because God keeps His word, I will”