

CORNERSTONECONNECTIONS
NOVEMBER 09 2024

leading them home

Scripture Story: Ezra 7–10.
Commentary: *Prophets and Kings*, chapters 50; 51.
Key Text: Ezra 7:10.

PREPARING TO TEACH

This lesson is primarily about leadership and preparing the heart to follow God's will. It is important to impress on the students that any person with the right attitude, discipline, and desire can lead people for God.

I. SYNOPSIS

Ezra is preparing to take the children of Israel home—at least those who want to come back home with him. He is a strong and learned man, about whom it says in 7:10: "For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel" (NIV). He was a leader, a teacher, and a doer of the Law and will of God.

The story goes on to tell us that many Israelites did go back with Ezra, although he had to make multiple pleas at times to get those he needed (the Levites in particular) to come along with him. He came to realize, however, that many of the Israelites who returned with him were not honoring the teachings of God's law in their lives. Therefore, he had to stand firm on the issue of intermarriage. God had given ample instruction to the Jewish nation about the dangers of intermarriages with nonbelievers. Such alliances would be a threat to the nation because they would undermine the spirituality of God's chosen people and neutralize their unique identity as bastions of God's truth among the nations.

As we teach this week we want to be very cognizant of the fact that becoming a leader is something that anyone can do with the right attitude and desire to know the will of God. While we don't necessarily know the kind of person Ezra was, what we can surmise is that he was disciplined, desirous of a relationship with God, and passionate for God's people. We should be leading the young people to these same values.

II. TARGET

The students will:

- Become more familiar with an important character and story in the Bible. *(Know)*
- Sense that God has a call on their lives. *(Feel)*
- Understand what is required of a spiritual leader and agree to go where God leads. *(Respond)*

III. EXPLORE

Spiritual Gifts and Ministries, Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Beliefs, no. 17: "God bestows upon all members of His church in every age spiritual gifts that each member is to employ in loving ministry for the common good of the church and of humanity. Given by the agency of the Holy Spirit, who apportions to each member as He wills, the gifts provide all abilities and ministries needed by the church to fulfill its divinely ordained functions. According to the Scriptures, these gifts include such ministries as faith, healing, prophecy, proclamation, teaching, administration, reconciliation, compassion, and self-sacrificing service and charity for the help and encouragement of people.

. . . When members employ these spiritual gifts as faithful stewards of God's varied grace, the church is protected from the destructive influence of false doctrine, grows with a growth that is from God, and is built up in faith and love." (Acts 6:1-7; Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12:7-11, 27, 28; Ephesians 4:8, 11-16; 1 Timothy 3:1-13; 1 Peter 4:10, 11.)

TEACHING

I. GETTING STARTED

Activity

Refer the students to the What Do You Think? *section of their lesson. After they have completed it, discuss their responses.*

Ask students to read the *What Do You Think?* section of their lesson and then ask the following questions:

- Do any of you go to school away from home? If so, what does it feel like to come home?
- Do you think it would make a difference if home were a shack compared to the mansion you live in at school? (Babylon to Jerusalem parallel.)
- What do you think God is calling you to do? Lead, follow?
- How far are you willing to go for God?
- Is there anyone you can look to in your life and say they are a spiritual leader? (Pastors are excluded.)

Illustration

Share this illustration in your own words:

Alexander the Great, the Greek king, once led his troops across a hot, arid desert. After nearly two weeks of marching, he and his soldiers were near death from thirst, yet Alexander pushed ahead.

In the noonday sun, two of his scouts brought what little water they were able to find. It barely filled a cup. Alexander's troops were shocked when he poured the water into the burning sand.

The king said, "It is of no use for one to drink when many thirst."

II. TEACHING THE STORY

Bridge to the Story

Share the following in your own words:

While Alexander went on to many victories, he also had a few problems. When you juxtapose this with Ezra's leadership style you can see a vast difference. While Ezra was also willing to be the kind of leader who would not abandon his people in their time of need, he also had a very different starting point from Alexander.

Alexander's leadership was much about him, while Ezra was always seeking the heart of God in his leadership of God's people. Ezra was never one to let his ego go in front of his responsibility to God, and to those who were entrusted into his care.

As Christ-called leaders, we must be willing to submit ourselves to His will, constantly seeking His heart and devoting ourselves to the study of His Word.

As we humble ourselves before God He will give us His strength and His wisdom to lead His people to where God desires them to go.

Out of the Story for Teachers

After you read the Into the Story *section with your students, use the following in your own words to process it with them.*

- What is the most important text in this group of texts? *Underline it.*
- Why do you think a genealogy was included in this story? Please explain.
- *Highlight* your favorite text out of the group.
- The Scripture story tells us that Ezra was "a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses" (Ezra 7:6, NIV). What does this tell us about the attributes of spiritual leadership?
- The passage speaks of all the different people who came to be part of the Temple worship: priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, Temple servants. What does this tell us about worship and God's will for worship?
- The king was gracious to God's people, giving them articles of gold and silver for the Temple, as well as money to buy sacrificial animals. Why do you think he was so generous?
- What does this passage tell us about God, about us, and about our relationship with God?

Use the following as more teachable passages that relate to today's story: Luke 5:1-6; Exodus 4:1-12.

Sharing Context and Background

Use the following information to shed more light on the story for your students. Share it in your own words.

There is a great deal of background important to understanding this story of Ezra. Perhaps the first point is that Ezra bringing the children of Israel back is a fulfillment of prophecy. It harkens back to Isaiah 44 and 45. It is possible that Cyrus had heard of the prophecy of Isaiah—this he could possibly have learned from Daniel. But regardless of how little or how much he knew, King Cyrus was used by God in order to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah.

The purpose of Ezra's account is interesting. It was probably written about 400 B.C., or a little later. The author was interested in encouraging the Jews in their despondency. They had returned in part from the Babylonian exile and had been able to rebuild the Temple. However, they really didn't have any true political freedom, and they were not able to reestablish King David's royal line.

The author saw clearly that in the history of Israel two things were intertwined: the Davidic line and the Temple. Therefore, he wrote a history of both things so that people might understand that if the Temple had been restored, then it was very possible that the restoration of the monarchy might happen as well.

However, what he did not understand was that the Temple without the coming Messiah was really just an empty shell.

Tips for Top-Notch Teaching

RABBI 101

Media Minds

Whenever possible, use media to create a better understanding of the history and background of the story you are talking about. Things such as PowerPoint presentations, video clips, and even using Google Earth to see the area we are talking about. This creates an opportunity for young people to see and hear, which always adds to the spiritual and educational experience. Where this is not possible, you can always explain to them what life would have been like for Ezra and the people of Israel.

Although the people, at least in part, were back in Judah, they were still not wholeheartedly following the law of God. While we have spent the majority of the time on the spiritual leadership of Ezra, it is important to note how Ezra was a firm believer in following the commands of God.

This is why Ezra was greatly distressed when he found out that many of the leaders in Israel had chosen to intermarry with women of foreign origin. "In his study of the causes leading to the Babylonish captivity, Ezra had learned that Israel's apostasy was largely traceable to their mingling with hea-

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Teaching From . . .

Refer your students to the other sections of their lesson.

- **Key Text**
  Invite the students to share the key text with the class if they have committed it to memory.
- **Flashlight**
  Read the Flashlight *statement, pointing out that most of the time it is from the commentary on this week's story found in the book* Prophets and Kings. *Ask what relationship they see between the statement and what they have just discussed from* Out of the Story.
- **Punch Lines**
  Point out to your students the verses listed in their lesson that relate to this week's story. Have them share the verse that speaks most directly to them and allow them to explain why they chose it.
- **Further Insight**
  Ask them how the quotes in Further Insight *convey the point of the story in this lesson.*

then nations. He had seen that if they had obeyed God's command to keep separate from the nations surrounding them, they would have been spared many sad and humiliating experiences. Now when he learned that notwithstanding the lessons of the past, men of prominence had dared transgress the laws given as a safeguard against apostasy, his heart was stirred within him" (*Prophets and Kings*, p. 620).

Ezra proved to be a man of God. He identified with the guilt of the people and interceded on their behalf, praying earnestly for God's forgiveness. His intercessory prayer for the people is recorded in Ezra 9.

"This was the beginning of a wonderful reformation. With infinite patience and tact, and with a careful consideration for the rights and welfare of every individual concerned, Ezra and his associates strove to lead the penitent of Israel into the right way. Above all else, Ezra was a teacher of the law; and as he gave personal attention to the examination of every case, he sought to impress the people with the holiness of this law and the blessings to be gained through obedience" (*Prophets and Kings*, p. 622).

Last, Ezra can be considered a "type" of Christ our High Priest (Hebrews 7). While not a one-to-one distinction, such as that found in Romans with the use of Adam as the "type" and Christ as the "Antitype," it is still a strong parallel that shows us that Christ is truly our High Priest, both spiritually and in a historical context, as we look back on the way Ezra led his people. Christ has always fallen into the role of leader and teacher. As well, Jesus has had that same ability as Ezra to be both flexible and inspirational as a leader. We are blessed to have such great examples of spiritual leadership.

III. CLOSING

Activity

Give each person a 3" x 5" card and have them list the attributes they are looking for in a spiritual leader. In fact, if you give them the cards at the beginning of the class, you can ask them the question before the lesson as well as after. Their answers might change with the influx of new information through the study of Ezra. At the end, collect the cards and have a prayer that each student might become one of those spiritual leaders.

Summary

Spiritual leadership and a desire to follow the will of God is of paramount importance to this lesson. We see Ezra, a priestly leader, devoting himself to the study of God's Word and will, as well as being a man of action who does what God is calling him to do. He is also a man who understands the human condition and is not so inflexible that he is not willing to work for both the good of the community and the good of the call of God in his life and the life of the children of Israel.

Young people need to understand what it means to be a good spiritual leader. Hopefully, you as the teacher have had the opportunity to be that spiritual leader to your young people. As they see the principles shown to us in Ezra, may they come to understand how you are that type of leader and how they can be as well.



Remind the students about the reading plan that will take them through the inspired commentary of the Bible, the Conflict of the Ages series. The reading that goes with this lesson is *Prophets and Kings* (or *Royalty and Ruin*),* chapters 50; 51.

*A special adaptation of *Prophets and Kings* has been created by the Ellen G. White Estate and the Pacific Press® Publishing Association. Get more info about it at www.cornerstoneconnections.net.

LESSON 6

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STUDENT LESSON

Scripture Story: Ezra 7–10.
Commentary: *Prophets and Kings*, chapters 50; 51.

leading them home



JACQUI JANETZKO

key text

"For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel."

(Ezra 7:10, NIV)

flashlight

"Born of the sons of Aaron, Ezra had been given a priestly training; and in addition to this he had acquired a familiarity with the writings of the magicians, the astrologers, and the wise men of the Medo-Persian realm. But he was not satisfied with his spiritual condition. He longed to be in full harmony with God; he longed for wisdom to carry out the divine will. And so he 'prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it.' Ezra 7:10. This led him to apply himself diligently to a study of the history of God's people, as recorded in the writings of prophets and kings. He searched the historical and poetical books of the Bible to learn why the Lord had permitted Jerusalem to be destroyed and His people carried captive into a heathen land" (*Prophets and Kings*, p. 608).

what do you think?

Do you like coming home? There is nothing like coming home after a long time away. You can imagine what it would have felt like to go home after all that time. How do you feel after being away from home? Are you happy to return? hesitant? unsure?

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INTO THE STORY

"After these things, during the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiah, the son of Shallum, the son of Zadok, the son of Ahitub, the son of Amariah, the son of Azariah, the son of Meraioth, the son of Zerahiah, the son of Uzzi, the son of Bukki, the son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest—this Ezra came up from Babylon. He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given. The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him. Some of the Israelites, including priests, Levites, musicians, gatekeepers and temple servants, also came up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes.

"Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in the fifth month of the seventh year of the king. He had begun his journey from Babylon on the first day of the first month, and he arrived in Jerusalem on the first day of the fifth month, for the gracious hand of his God was on him. For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel."

"Now I decree that any of the Israelites in my kingdom, including priests and Levites, who volunteer to go to Jerusalem with you, may go. You are sent by the king and his seven advisers to inquire about Judah and Jerusalem with regard to the Law of your God, which is in your hand. Moreover, you are to take with you the silver and gold that the king and his advisers have freely given to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, together with all the silver and gold you may obtain from the province of Babylon, as well as the freewill offerings of the people and priests for the temple of their God in Jerusalem. With this money be sure to buy bulls, rams and male lambs, together with their grain offerings and drink offerings, and sacrifice them on the altar of the temple of your God in Jerusalem.

"You and your fellow Israelites may then do whatever seems best with the rest of the silver and gold, in accordance with the will of your God. Deliver to the God of Jerusalem all the articles entrusted to you for worship in the temple of your God. And anything else needed for the temple of your God that you are responsible to supply, you may provide from the royal treasury."

(Ezra 7:1-10, 13-20, NIV)

did you know?

About 40,000 Israelites went home with Ezra during this period. This was not the entire nation of Israel, but it was a significant number. The question of why some didn't go home should be looked at. Perhaps, as we see later on in the text, it is because of the intermarrying that the Israelites became so fond of during this time. Perhaps it was because of their lengthy captivity that they had become so comfortable in a foreign land that they couldn't see themselves leaving. Do you think you would have stayed or left?

OUT OF THE STORY

What do you think of Ezra now that you know a little bit more about him?

The king entrusted Ezra with money, valuable articles for the Temple, and told him to let him know if he needed anything else! What does this say about Ezra's character, and the trust that the king put in Ezra?

How can we be persons of character so that others can trust us?

How could you be like Ezra, devoting yourself to Scripture and following God's will?

Those going home included priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and Temple servants. What does that tell us about God? about us? about our relationship with God?

How do you think the Israelites felt about coming home?

Why do you think Ezra was picked out of everyone else to lead the children of Israel back to the Promised Land?

punch lines

"Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah" **(Acts 5:42, NIV).**

"Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account" **(Hebrews 4:13, NIV).**

"Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it" **(Proverbs 4:23, NIV).**

"Now devote your heart and soul to seeking the LORD your God. Begin to build the sanctuary of the LORD God" **(1 Chronicles 22:19, NIV).**

"Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?" **(1 Corinthians 3:16, NIV).**

"For lack of guidance a nation falls, but victory is won through many advisers" **(Proverbs 11:14, NIV).**

further insight

"Ezra endeavored to gain a heart preparation for the work he believed was before him. He sought God earnestly, that he might be a wise teacher in Israel."—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 608

"Ezra became a mouthpiece for God, educating those about him in the principles that govern heaven."—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 609

Sabbath

Read Ezra 7:10.

God bestows upon all members of His church in every age spiritual gifts that each member is to employ in loving ministry for the common good of the church and of humanity" (Fundamental Belief 17, Spiritual Gifts and Ministries).

Coming home is always an interesting thing. Sometimes it is sweet, sometimes it is bitter. The city of Jerusalem was probably still in ruins at the time Ezra was given permission to take whoever wanted to go back to Israel. This would have made the coming home a bit bitter. However, they were no longer to be foreigners in a foreign country, so that had to be sweet.

It is important to realize that Ezra's leadership abilities were pretty important here. He had to convince those Israelites that were becoming more and more comfortable in Babylon, a city of incomparable riches, that they should go home to the rubble that was Jerusalem. That could not have been an easy task. Not only that: when he got the group together, there were no people from the tribe of Levi, which were very important to have, and so he had to go back and convince them. He could have done this only if he had trained himself to listen to God and to pray at every turn.

In what ways has God placed you in a position to influence those around you?

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Sunday

Read Colossians 1:11.

After having read the *Out of the Story* questions, do you think that you could have been a leader like Ezra? Could you have disciplined yourself enough in order to listen to God and make His will the desire of your heart? The task that Ezra was taking was a huge task, and one that could easily have failed. What do you do when you have a difficult task to complete? Do you bring God into the equation? Explain.

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Monday

Read Proverbs 9:10.

Ezra is the key to this story. The *Key Text* says that he was committed not only to knowing the law, but to keeping it as well. This is where the rubber meets the road when it comes to believing in God. Do we do what we know He wants us to? If not, why not? Do we even care about what He is asking us to do? Ezra cared! Not only did Ezra care, but he moved as soon as he was asked to move. He became what God needed him to be—a leader—and helped change the course of history.

Tuesday

Read 1 Chronicles 22:19 and Ezra 7:25.

But he was not satisfied with his spiritual condition." This *Flashlight* quote is important to the reading of this whole text and in understanding the kind of person Ezra was. We oftentimes realize that something is wrong with our spirituality. We often think that we understand what we are supposed to do. However, are we willing to actually move in the direction that God is asking us to move? Are we truly seeking to know the will of God by becoming students of Scripture and people of action when it comes to His will?

Wednesday

Read Proverbs 3:23.

The *Punch Lines* this week spoke specifically about why we do what we do, and about our hearts. Ezra prepared his heart by making a decision to love God and seek His will. The decision came and the rest followed. Perhaps this is a good model for us.

"As you receive the Spirit of Christ—the Spirit of unselfish love and labor for others—you will grow and bring forth fruit. . . . More and more you will reflect the likeness of Christ in all that is pure, noble, and lovely" (Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 67). The reality is that once our hearts are prepared, we become more and more in tune with what God wants and how we can fulfill His will in our lives. If Ezra could move a country's worth of people, in what ways can we move ourselves?

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Thursday

Read Romans 10:17.

Have you decided to move your heart to know the Scriptures, seek God's will, and lead others to Him? It's a big question, with another question in tow: "How?" The first thing to do is to ask God into your life and ask Him to make His presence known. Then search the Scriptures to see where God is talking to you. After this, it is simply a matter of movement, in order to live what you know to be true.

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Friday

Read Jeremiah 29:11-13.

Does God have a plan for you? Absolutely! It is the same plan for us all: to be together with one another again soon. He seeks reunion with all of us, and with you as well! Ask yourself this question: "How can I be a leader like Ezra for You, Lord?"

this week's reading*

Prophets and Kings, chapters 50; 51.

**Royalty and Ruin* is a special adaptation of *Prophets and Kings*, created for you by the Ellen G. White Estate and Pacific Press®. Get more information about it by going to www.cornerstoneconnections.net and clicking on "Conflict of the Ages series." By following the weekly reading plan, you will read at least one book of the Conflict of the Ages series each year.