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THE LOOKOUT

JANUARY 2023

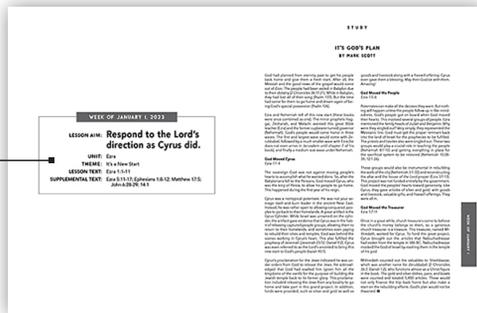
Unit: Ezra

Theme: It's a New Start

Overview: The calendar frustrates us but also guides us. God carved time from out of eternity; he made days, weeks, months, seasons, and years. Surely one reason for such creativity was to give us fresh starts and new beginnings. When Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah helped bring back the exiles from Babylon, they also helped provide to them a fresh start with God. Ezra the Bible teacher led the way in reconstituting the nation of exiles. During January, students will learn of God's exciting plans for fresh starts, that fresh starts require prayer and fasting, and that they are not always easy. Students also will learn more about the distinctive lives God calls his people to live while in this world.

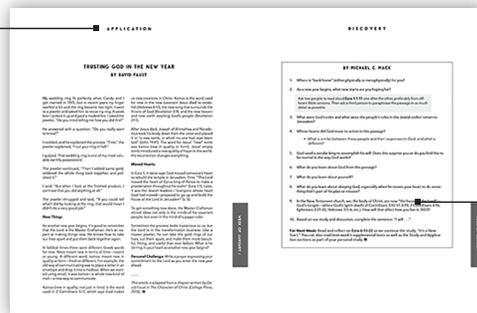
HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.



Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery**.



Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

WEEK OF JANUARY 1, 2023

LESSON AIM: **Respond to the Lord's direction as Cyrus did.**

UNIT: Ezra

THEME: It's a New Start

LESSON TEXT: Ezra 1:1-11

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Ezra 5:11-17; Ephesians 1:8-12; Matthew 17:5;
John 6:28-29; 14:1

STUDY

IT'S GOD'S PLAN

BY MARK SCOTT

God had planned from eternity past to get his people back home and give them a fresh start. After all, the Messiah and the good news of the gospel would come out of Zion. The people had been exiled in Babylon due to their idolatry (2 Chronicles 36:17-21). While in Babylon, they had lost all of their song (Psalm 137). But the time had come for them to go home and dream again of being God's special possession (Psalm 126).

Ezra and Nehemiah tell of this new start (these books were once combined as one). The minor prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi assisted this great Bible teacher (Ezra) and the former cupbearer turned governor (Nehemiah). God's people would come home in three waves. The first and largest wave would come with Zerubbabel, followed by a much smaller wave with Ezra (he does not even arrive in Jerusalem until chapter 7 of his book), and finally a medium-size wave under Nehemiah.

God Moved Cyrus

Ezra 1:1-4

The sovereign God was not against moving people's hearts to accomplish what he wanted done. So, after the Babylonians fell to the Persians, God moved Cyrus, who was the *king of Persia*, to allow his people to go home. This happened during the first year of his reign.

Cyrus was a nontypical potentate. He was not your average slash-and-burn leader in the ancient Near East. Instead, he was rather open to allowing conquered peoples to go back to their homelands. A great artifact is the Cyrus Cylinder. While Israel was unnamed on the cylinder, the artifact gave evidence that Cyrus was in the habit of releasing captured people groups, allowing them to return to their homelands, and sometimes even paying to rebuild their cities and temples. God was behind the scenes working in Cyrus's heart. This also fulfilled the prophecy of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 25:12; Daniel 9:2). Cyrus was even referred to as the Lord's anointed to bring this new start to God's people (Isaiah 45:1).

Cyrus's *proclamation* for the Jews indicated he was under orders from God to release the Jews. He acknowledged that God had exalted him (given him *all the kingdoms of the earth*) for the purpose of building the Jewish temple back to its former glory. This proclamation included releasing the Jews from any locality to go home and take part in this grand project. In addition, funds were provided, such as *silver and gold* as well as

goods and livestock along with a *freewill offering*. Cyrus even gave them a blessing; *May their God be with them*. Amazing!

God Moved His People

Ezra 1:5-6

Potentates can make all the decrees they want. But nothing will happen unless the people follow up in like-mindedness. God's people got on board when God moved their hearts. This involved several groups of people. Ezra mentioned the *family heads of Judah and Benjamin*. Why were they singled out? Very simply, they represented the Messianic line. God must get the proper remnant back into the land of Israel for the prophecies to be fulfilled. The *priests and Levites* also were singled out. These two groups would play a crucial role in teaching the people (Nehemiah 8:1-10) and getting everything in place for the sacrificial system to be restored (Nehemiah 10:28-39; 12:1-26).

These groups would also be instrumental in rebuilding the walls of the city (Nehemiah 3:1-32) and reconstructing the altar and the *house of the Lord* proper (Ezra 3:1-13). This project was not funded entirely by the government. God moved the peoples' hearts toward generosity. Like Cyrus, they gave *articles of silver and gold, with goods and livestock, valuable gifts, and freewill offerings*. They were all in.

God Moved the Treasurer

Ezra 1:7-11

Once in a great while, church treasurers come to believe the church's money belongs to them, so a generous church treasurer is a treasure. This treasurer, named *Mithredath*, worked for Cyrus. To fund this great project, Cyrus brought out the *articles* that Nebuchadnezzar had stolen from the temple in 586 BC. Nebuchadnezzar mocked the God of Israel by stashing them in the *temple of his god*.

Mithredath counted out the valuables to *Sheshbazzar*, which was another name for Zerubbabel (2 Chronicles 36:7; Daniel 1:2), who functions almost as a Christ-figure in the book. The gold and silver dishes, pans, and bowls were counted and totaled 5,400 articles. These would not only finance the trip back home but also make a start on the rebuilding efforts. God's plan would not be thwarted. ■

APPLICATION

TRUSTING GOD IN THE NEW YEAR

BY DAVID FAUST

My wedding ring fit perfectly when Candy and I got married in 1975, but in recent years my finger swelled a bit and the ring became too tight. I went to a jeweler and asked him to resize my ring. A week later I picked it up and paid a modest fee. I asked the jeweler, “Do you mind telling me how you did this?”

He answered with a question: “Do you really want to know?”

I nodded, and he explained the process. “First,” the jeweler explained, “I cut your ring in half.”

I gulped. That wedding ring is one of my most valuable earthly possessions!

The jeweler continued, “Then I added some gold, soldered the whole thing back together, and polished it.”

I said, “But when I look at the finished product, I can’t see that you did anything at all.”

The jeweler shrugged and said, “If you could tell what I did by looking at the ring, that would mean I didn’t do a very good job.”

New Things

As another new year begins, it’s good to remember that the Lord is the Master Craftsman. He’s an expert at making things new. He knows how to take our lives apart and put them back together again.

In biblical times there were different Greek words for *new*. *Neos* meant new in terms of time—recent or young. A different word, *kainos*, meant new in quality or form—fresh or different. For example, the old way of communicating was to place a letter in an envelope and drop it into a mailbox. When we started using email, it was *kainos*—a whole new kind of mail—a new way to communicate.

Kainos (new in quality, not just in time) is the word used in 2 Corinthians 5:17, which says God makes

us new creations in Christ. *Kainos* is the word used for *new* in the new covenant Jesus died to establish (Hebrews 8:13), the new song that surrounds the throne of God (Revelation 5:9), and the new heaven and new earth awaiting God’s people (Revelation 21:1).

After Jesus died, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus took his body down from the cross and placed it in “a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid” (John 19:41). The word for Jesus’ “new” tomb was *kainos* (new in quality or form). Jesus’ empty tomb introduced a new quality of hope to the world. His resurrection changes everything.

Moved Hearts

In Ezra 1, it twice says God moved someone’s heart to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. First, “The Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm” (Ezra 1:1). Later, it was the Jewish leaders—“everyone whose heart God had moved—prepared to go up and build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem” (v. 5).

To get something new done, the Master Craftsman stirred ideas not only in the minds of his covenant people, but even in the mind of a pagan ruler.

Sometimes the process looks mysterious to us, but the Lord is in the transformation business. Like a master jeweler, he can take the gold rings of our lives, cut them apart, and make them more beautiful, fitting, and useful than ever before. What is he stirring in your heart as another new year begins?

Personal Challenge: Write a prayer expressing your commitment to the Lord as you enter the new year ahead.

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This article is adapted from a chapter written by David Faust in The Character of Christ (College Press, 2018). ■

DISCOVERY

BY MICHAEL C. MACK

1. Where is “back home” (either physically or metaphysically) for you?
2. As a new year begins, what new starts are you hoping for?

Ask two people to read aloud **Ezra 1:1-11** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to paraphrase the passage in as much detail as possible.

3. What were God’s roles and what were the people’s roles in the Jewish exiles’ return to Jerusalem?
4. Whose hearts did God move to action in this passage?
 - What is similar between these people and their responses to God, and what is different?
5. God used a secular king to accomplish his will. Does this surprise you or do you find this to be normal in the way God works?
6. What do you learn about God from this passage?
7. What do you learn about yourself?
8. What do you learn about obeying God, especially when he moves your heart to do something that’s part of his plan or mission?
9. In the New Testament church, we, the body of Christ, are now “the house of the Lord”—God’s temple—where God’s Spirit dwells (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:21-22; Hebrews 3:5-6; etc.). How will that affect how you live in 2023?
10. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: “I will . . .”

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Ezra 6:13-22** as we continue the study, “It’s a New Start.” You can also read next week’s supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study. **■**