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EZRA

A 4-Week Group Bible Study

By Greg and Kayla Gibson

THE COMPLETE STUDY • WEEKS 1–4 • EZRA 1:1–10:44
GENERAL / MIXED GROUP EDITION

Ezra: A 4-Week Bible Study

A 4-Week Bible Study • ESV® • 4 Sessions of 75–90 Minutes

PARTICIPANT STUDY EDITION

Synchronized Section-by-Section with the Leader Guide Edition · Includes Group Reflection Workspace

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Participant Study Edition • General / Mixed Group Track

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WEEK 1 OF 4

Week 1: The Stirred Hearts Go Up — Ezra 1:1–2:70

Scripture Scope: Ezra 1:1–2:70 (ESV) • Session Length: 75–90 Minutes

- **The title:** The book is named for Ezra, a priest and scribe who appears in chapters 7–10. In the Hebrew Bible, Ezra and Nehemiah were counted as one book. This series treats them as two studies joined by a bridge.
- **The setting:** Ezra picks up where 2 Chronicles ends, with Cyrus king of Persia inviting the exiles to go up and rebuild (538 BC). It covers two returns from Babylon: the first under Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel (chapters 1–6, from 538 to the temple's completion in 515 BC), and Ezra's own return about fifty-eight years later (chapters 7–10, 458 BC). The events of Esther fall in the gap between chapters 6 and 7.
- **The main characters:** Cyrus, Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, Jeshua the priest, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, the Persian kings Darius and Artaxerxes, Ezra, and Shecaniah.
- **Its languages:** Most of Ezra is in Hebrew, but the official letters in 4:8–6:18 and 7:12–26 are in Aramaic, the language of the Persian Empire.
- **The structure (two parts):**
  - The first return and the rebuilt temple (chapters 1–6).
  - Ezra's return and the people's renewal (chapters 7–10).
- **Why it matters:** God keeps his word. He stirs the hearts of emperors and ordinary families, rebuilds worship through opposition, guides his people by his good hand, and calls them to holiness and honest confession. Ezra points to Jesus, the true temple, the faithful teacher of God's Word, and the righteous one who intercedes for his people.

How This 4-Week Study Works

You may notice this study is shorter than our usual eight weeks. Even though we are 8weekbiblestudy.com, stretching Ezra to eight weeks would have left it thin on content, and we never want to trade quality for quantity.

Designed for weekly small groups, mini-churches, and community gatherings (75–90 minutes per session) rather than daily homework checklists, each week of Ezra invites you to walk through the story of God's people coming home together through six repeatable sections:

- **Section X.1 — Opening:** Sets the scene, the Week at a Glance, Head, Heart, and Hands objectives, the Opening Frame, and the Opening Entry Question.
- **Section X.2 — Historical & Literary Context:** Places the week's chapters inside the structure of Ezra and the ancient Near Eastern world.
- **Section X.3 — Movement 1:** The week's first guided passage: Guided Scripture Reading, Anchor Verses, Teaching Narrative, and Group Discussion Questions.
- **Section X.4 — Movement 2:** The week's second guided passage, following the same flow.
- **Section X.5 — Canonical Horizon:** Traces how the passage echoes across Scripture and finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.
- **Section X.6 — Application, Looking Ahead, and Closing Prayer:** Moves the week's study into everyday life, previews next week, and closes in prayer.

Key anchor verses are printed in each section for quick reference. Longer focal passages are read aloud together from the ESV. Ezra includes long lists of names, which the study summarizes in words, and a painful account of broken marriages in its final chapter, which the study retells briefly and with care.

Choosing a Bible Translation: Top 5 Translations Compared

Every English Bible translation falls along a spectrum between two primary approaches: word-for-word translation (formal equivalence, which prioritizes literal accuracy to the original phrasing and sentence structure) and thought-for-thought translation (dynamic equivalence, which prioritizes immediate modern readability by translating idioms and ideas into natural contemporary expressions). Here is how five widely used English translations compare:

- **ESV (English Standard Version) — Word-for-Word**
  - Pros: Follows the wording and sentence structure of the original Hebrew and Greek closely while using modern English; well suited to close study.
  - Cons: Because it tracks the original sentence structure, some phrasing can feel more formal than everyday speech.
- **NIV (New International Version) — Balanced (Between Word-for-Word and Thought-for-Thought)**
  - Pros: Widely read; balances accuracy to the original languages with natural, everyday readability.
  - Cons: Because some idioms are rendered as modern expressions, a few literal wordplays or technical terms can be less visible.
- **NLT (New Living Translation) — Thought-for-Thought**
  - Pros: Warm and conversational; reads smoothly aloud and helps readers follow the big picture of long passages.
  - Cons: Because it prioritizes meaning over literal phrasing, it can be harder to use for close word study.
- **CSB (Christian Standard Bible) — Optimal Equivalence (Balanced)**
  - Pros: Stays close to the original words where possible while smoothing awkward phrasing into natural modern English.
  - Cons: Because it is a newer translation, some well-known verses may sound different from the wording many readers remember.
- **KJV / NKJV (King James Version & New King James Version) — Traditional Word-for-Word**
  - Pros: Historic cadence that shaped English literature and church history; the NKJV updates archaic pronouns ("thee/thou") while keeping the classic rhythm.
  - Cons: Often reads like older English poetry, with complex sentences and archaic or formal vocabulary that can be harder for modern readers to follow.

This study quotes the ESV.

Greg & Kayla's Recommended Study Bibles

Having a trusted study Bible on hand is one of the best ways to go deeper as you read through Ezra:

- **Greg's Favorite Study Bible:** The MacArthur Study Bible (ESV), which contains extensive explanatory notes beneath almost every verse, ideal for detailed study.
- **Kayla's Favorite Study Bible:** The ESV Study Bible, containing over 20,000 study notes, articles, and explanations.

The 4-Week Ezra Study at a Glance

Week	Title & Passage	Movement 1 / Movement 2	Canonical Horizon
1	**The Stirred Hearts Go Up** (1:1–2:70)	Cyrus's Decree and the Stirred Hearts (1:1–11) / The Returning Community (2:1–70)	The God who keeps his word and calls his people home
2	**The House Rises Again** (3:1–6:22)	The Altar, the Foundation, and Opposition (3:1–4:24) / Prophets, Decrees, and Dedication (5:1–6:22)	Christ the true temple and the greater glory
3	**The Good Hand of Our God** (7:1–8:36)	Ezra the Scribe and the King's Letter (7:1–28) / The Journey Under God's Protection (8:1–36)	The Word taught and the hand of God in Christ
4	**Confession and Costly Renewal** (9:1–10:44)	Ezra's Prayer of Confession (9:1–15) / The People's Response (10:1–44)	Confession, the remnant, and the holiness of Christ's people

Scripture Scope: Ezra 1:1–2:70 • **Focal Group Readings:** Ezra 1:1–11; 2:1–2; 2:59–70 (ESV) • **Session Pacing:** 75–90 Minutes

Section 1.1

Opening: The Stirred Hearts Go Up (Ezra 1:1–2:70)

Opening

For decades, Jerusalem has lain in ruins and many of its people have lived as exiles in Babylon, just as Jeremiah warned. Then a new emperor, Cyrus of Persia, issues a decree: the God of heaven has charged him to build a house in Jerusalem, and whoever belongs to God's people may go up. Not everyone goes.

But everyone whose spirit God has stirred rises to make the long journey. Their neighbors load them with gifts, Cyrus hands back the gold and silver vessels Nebuchadnezzar had carried off, and a long list of families, priests, singers, and gatekeepers sets out for home.

Week 1 At a Glance

Scripture Scope	Ezra 1:1–2:70 (Cyrus's decree, the stirred hearts who go up, the return of the temple vessels, and the list of the returning community, its gifts, and its settlement)
Focal Passages	Ezra 1:1–11; 2:1–2; 2:59–70
Literary & Structural Anchor	God stirs both the emperor (1:1) and his people (1:5). Ezra opens with the decree that closes 2 Chronicles (36:22–23), and the key verb is "go up" (1:3, 5; 2:1). The neighbors' gifts echo the exodus (Exodus 12:35–36). The list of names (chapter 2) shows that the new community is the same people of God.
Big Idea	God keeps his word, stirs hearts, and calls his people home.

Week 1 Learning Objectives (Head, Heart, Hands)

HEAD	**Know the Story:** Understand Cyrus's decree, how it fulfilled Jeremiah's word, and why the list of returnees mattered.
HEART	**Let God Stir You:** Trust that God keeps his promises and moves hearts, including yours.
HANDS	**Rise and Go Up:** Take one concrete step in response to God's stirring, whether in worship, service, or generosity.

Opening Frame: Let Him Go Up

2 Chronicles ended with the temple burned, the land lying empty, and then a surprise: Cyrus's decree, "Let him go up." Ezra begins with those same words and tells us who went up and what they built. This week, watch whom God stirs to make the long journey home, what they carry with them, and why every name on the list matters. The question for this week: when God opens a door, what does it take to rise and go? Before we read together, take a moment to share with the group:

Opening Entry Question (Icebreaker)

1.1 Q1 (Opening Entry Question): Tell about coming home after a long time away. What did it feel like?

Section 1.2

Historical & Literary Context: The Decree of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1–2:70)

Entering the World of the Return from Exile

1. Historical Background

Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and its temple in 586 BC. In 539 BC Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon, and in his first year (538 BC) he allowed the exiles to return. Jeremiah had foretold seventy years of exile (Jeremiah 25:11–12; 29:10), and Isaiah had named Cyrus as the LORD's shepherd (Isaiah 44:28; 45:1).

2. Cultural Setting

Judah was now a small province of the Persian Empire, part of the region called "Beyond the River." Conquerors carried off temple treasures; returning them signaled restoration.

3. Literary Structure of Ezra 1:1–2:70

- **The decree** (1:1–4)
- **Stirred hearts respond** (1:5–6)
- **The vessels returned** (1:7–11)
- **Leaders of the return** (2:1–2)
- **Families and towns** (2:3–35)
- **Priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and temple servants** (2:36–58)
- **Those who could not prove descent** (2:59–63)
- **Totals and gifts** (2:64–69)
- **Settlement** (2:70)

4. Key Themes

God's promise kept; God's sovereignty over rulers; stirred hearts; continuity with the past; a new exodus; freewill generosity.

5. Theological Considerations

God works through an unbelieving emperor to keep his word, and he also works within his people to make them willing.

6. Relevant Scholarly Insights

The Cyrus Cylinder, a clay inscription from Cyrus's reign, records his policy of returning deported peoples and restoring their sanctuaries. It credits the Babylonian god Marduk; Ezra shows that the LORD stood behind the decree.

Group Discussion Questions (Section 1.2)

1.2 Q1: God announced through Jeremiah that the exile would last seventy years, and Ezra opens by saying the LORD acted "that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled" (1:1). What does it mean to you that God keeps promises across generations?

1.2 Q2: Cyrus credited his own gods, yet Ezra says the LORD stirred him. How can God use leaders who do not know him?

1.2 Q3: Only some of the exiles went back. What might have kept others in Babylon?

Section 1.3

Movement 1: Cyrus's Decree and the Stirred Hearts (Ezra 1:1–11)

Guided Scripture Reading

Read aloud in this order, with brief connecting summaries between readings:

- **Reader 1: Ezra 1:1–4** (focal passage) — The LORD stirs up Cyrus, who proclaims that the God of heaven has charged him to build a house at Jerusalem and invites God's people to go up; their neighbors are to help them.
- **Reader 2: Ezra 1:5–6** (focal passage) — Everyone whose spirit God has stirred rises to go up, and their neighbors give them silver, gold, goods, and freewill offerings.
- **Reader 3: Ezra 1:7–11** (focal passage) — Cyrus brings out the temple vessels Nebuchadnezzar had taken and counts them out to Sheshbazzar, who carries them back to Jerusalem.

Anchor Verses (ESV)

> **Ezra 1:2:** "Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.
>
> **Ezra 1:3:** Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem.
>
> **Ezra 1:5:** Then rose up the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem.

Teaching Narrative: Hearts Stirred by God

1. A Word Fulfilled (Ezra 1:1)

God's timing is exact. The seventy years are complete, and God moves.

2. An Emperor Stirred (Ezra 1:1–4)

The most powerful man in the world becomes the servant of God's promise.

3. Whoever Is Among You (Ezra 1:3)

The decree is an invitation, not a command. Each family must decide.

4. Hearts Stirred (Ezra 1:5)

The same God who stirred Cyrus stirs ordinary families. The return begins in the heart.

5. Gifts for the Journey (Ezra 1:6)

Like Israel leaving Egypt, the returnees are sent off with gifts.

6. The Vessels Come Home (Ezra 1:7–11)

The very vessels carried off in judgment are returned. The returned vessels show that exile had not placed God's purposes beyond recovery.

Group Discussion Questions (Section 1.3)

1.3 Q1: Cyrus's decree said, "Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up" (1:3). Cyrus's decree invited God's exiled people to return, but each family still had to respond. What does this teach about hearing and personally responding when God opens a door?

1.3 Q2: Those who went were "everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up" (1:5). How have you experienced God stirring your heart toward something?

1.3 Q3: God stirred both an emperor and ordinary families (1:1, 5). What does that say about how God works in the world and in individual lives?

1.3 Q4: The neighbors' gifts echo Israel leaving Egypt (Exodus 12:35–36). Why might the returnees have seen their journey as a new exodus?

1.3 Q5: The temple vessels taken in judgment were brought back (1:7–11). What has been lost in your life or community that you hope God might restore?

Section 1.4

Movement 2: The Returning Community (Ezra 2:1–70)

Guided Scripture Reading

Read aloud in this order, with brief connecting summaries between readings:

- **Reader 1: Ezra 2:1–2** (focal passage) — The people of the province who came up from the captivity return to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town, led by Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and others.
- **Summary of Ezra 2:3–58** — A long list follows: lay families by clan and by hometown, then priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and temple servants, each group counted.

- **Reader 2: Ezra 2:59–63** (focal passage) — Some cannot prove their family line; priests among them are kept from serving until a priest can consult the Urim and Thummim.
- **Summary of Ezra 2:64–69** — The whole assembly numbered 42,360, besides servants and singers, with horses, mules, camels, and donkeys. Some heads of families gave freewill offerings of gold, silver, and priests' garments for the house of God.
- **Reader 3: Ezra 2:70** (focal passage) — The priests, Levites, and all Israel settle in their towns.

Anchor Verses (ESV)

> **Ezra 2:1:** Now these were the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of those exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried captive to Babylonia. They returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town.
>
> **Ezra 2:68:** Some of the heads of families, when they came to the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem, made freewill offerings for the house of God, to erect it on its site.
>
> **Ezra 2:70:** Now the priests, the Levites, some of the people, the singers, the gatekeepers, and the temple servants lived in their towns, and all the rest of Israel in their towns.

Teaching Narrative: Every Name Counted

1. Each to His Own Town (Ezra 2:1–2)

The return is not abstract. Real families go back to real places.

2. Every Name Counted (Ezra 2:3–58)

The list shows continuity: these are the same families, the same tribes, the same priests and singers.

3. The Singers and Gatekeepers (Ezra 2:41–42)

Worship is woven into the community from the start.

4. Unable to Prove Descent (Ezra 2:59–63)

Some families wait, unsure where they belong, until God makes his will known.

5. Gifts for the House (Ezra 2:68–69)

Before a single stone is laid, the people give freely for God's house.

6. Settled (Ezra 2:70)

The community is home, ready for what comes next.

Group Discussion Questions (Section 1.4)

> **1.4 Q1:** The returnees "returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town" (2:1). Why do you think Ezra records so many names and places?

1.4 Q2: Singers, gatekeepers, and temple servants are counted alongside priests and Levites (2:40–58). What does that say about the value of every role in God's people?

1.4 Q3: Some families could not prove their ancestry or priestly descent (2:59–63). How might that uncertainty have affected them, and what assurance does the gospel give about belonging to God's family?

1.4 Q4: Before any building began, some "made freewill offerings for the house of God, to erect it on its site" (2:68). What does giving before seeing results say about faith?

1.4 Q5: Chapter 2 ends with all Israel settled "in their towns" (2:70). What helps a community of faith become a real home for people?

Section 1.5

Canonical Horizon: The God Who Keeps His Word and Calls His People Home

Tracing the Thread Across Scripture

The God who kept his word through Jeremiah and called his people home points forward to Jesus, in whom every promise of God finds its Yes and through whom God gathers his people home. Turn to each passage as the connections are traced.

1. Yes in Christ (2 Corinthians 1:20)

God kept his promise through Jeremiah; all his promises find their Yes in Christ.

2. God at Work in You (Philippians 2:13)

As God stirred the returnees, he works in believers both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

3. Names Written in Heaven (Luke 10:20; Revelation 21:27)

Ezra's list recorded who belonged; Jesus tells his disciples to rejoice that their names are written in heaven.

4. Exiles Heading Home (1 Peter 1:1; Hebrews 11:13–16)

Christians are called exiles and strangers who long for a better, heavenly country.

Anchor Verse (ESV)

> **Ezra 1:5:** Then rose up the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem.

Group Discussion Questions (Section 1.5)

1.5 Q1: Paul writes that "all the promises of God find their Yes in him" (2 Corinthians 1:20). How does Cyrus's decree help you trust God's promises in Christ?

1.5 Q2: Jesus told his disciples to "rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:20). How does that compare with having your name on Ezra's list?

1.5 Q3: Peter calls believers "elect exiles" (1 Peter 1:1). In what ways do you feel like an exile, and what does going home mean for a Christian?

Personal & Group Application (Head, Heart, Hands)

HEAD	God kept his word through Jeremiah, stirred Cyrus and his people, returned the temple vessels, and brought a counted community home.
HEART	God keeps every promise in Christ and writes our names in heaven.
HANDS	Faith responds to God's stirring, gives willingly, and makes room for others to belong.

Section 1.6

Application, Looking Ahead, and Closing Prayer

Application

Take a few minutes to move this week's study into everyday life. Discuss these three questions together and write down what you want to remember:

1.6 Q1: Where is God stirring your heart right now, and what would it look like to rise and go?

1.6 Q2: Who in your life needs to know they belong in God's family?

1.6 Q3: What is one way you could give freely toward God's work this week?

Looking Ahead to Next Week

Recap: In Week 1, God kept his word, stirred hearts, and brought his people home.

Transition: The people are home, but the temple is still rubble. Next they build the altar and the foundation, and opposition begins.

Week 2 Overview — The House Rises Again (Ezra 3:1–6:22): Movement 1, The Altar, the Foundation, and Opposition (3:1–4:24), covers worship restored, joy and weeping at the foundation, and the work halted. Movement 2, Prophets, Decrees, and Dedication (5:1–6:22), covers the prophets who restart the work, Cyrus's decree found, and the temple finished with joy. The Canonical Horizon traces Christ the true temple and the greater glory.

Focal Readings to Preview

- Ezra 3:1–13
- Ezra 4:1–5
- Ezra 4:24–5:5
- Ezra 6:13–22

My One Concrete Step for the Week Ahead

Write down or name aloud the specific rhythm, boundary, or conversation you want to practice before next week's gathering:

Closing Prayer

Close your time together by inviting each person to share a one-sentence takeaway or prayer request, then pray together along these lines:

Closing Group Prayer

LORD, God of heaven, you keep your word across the generations. Thank you for stirring hearts to rise and go, and for stirring ours. We pray for any here who feel they do not belong, for those who are adopted, estranged, or unsure of their roots; remind them that they belong to you. Give us willing and generous hearts. Thank you for Jesus, in whom every promise is Yes and in whom our names are written in heaven. Stir us to rise and go wherever you lead. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.