

# Rising From the Ruins

## Foundation

*Ezra Chapters 1-3*

**Leaders Guide**

### The Promise

The Israelites had been in captivity, in exile, for 70 years—a whole generation. Very few people were left who had seen their home. Most had been born and raised in Persia. Why would they want to return to a place they had never seen and rebuild a temple in which they had never worshiped? They were holding on to God's promise given through the prophets.

Read Isaiah 44:28 and 45:13, Jeremiah 29:10-14, and Ezra 1:1.

Answer the following questions:

#### Level A

- What was prophesied by Isaiah and Jeremiah?
- How was it fulfilled?
- Give other examples that you know from the Bible where God fulfilled his promises to the Israelites.

#### Level B

- How does Ezra 1:1 fulfill the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah?
- What does this tell you about God?
- How have God's promises kept you going during difficult times?

#### Level C

- What is amazing about the accuracy of the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah?
- How hard is it to hold on to promises that literally take a lifetime to complete? If you were an Israelite, how might you have held onto the promise?
- What promises of God are important to you and affect the way you live your life?

## Where God Dwells

Before there was a temple, there was a tent (Exodus 26). The Israelites carried it around the desert as the focus of their faith—the place where God could dwell with them. Finally they settled in the promised land and built a permanent structure. Ezekiel calls the city of Jerusalem, Oholebah. This means “my tent is here.” The temple became a permanent home for God to be with the people. They did not believe that God could come down from heaven and dwell among them without the temple which contained the holy place where the ark of the covenant rested (the holy seat). Jerusalem and its temple were the centerpiece, the foundation of their connection to God.

*Note to leaders: After the exile to Babylon, the ark of the covenant was lost. It would not have been part of this new temple.*

Read the following verses for other names given to Jerusalem.

Ezekiel 48:35 \_\_\_\_\_

Isaiah 1:26 \_\_\_\_\_

Isaiah 60:14 \_\_\_\_\_

Isaiah 62:12 \_\_\_\_\_

Jeremiah 3:17 \_\_\_\_\_

Jerimiah 33:16 \_\_\_\_\_

Zechariah 8:3 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer the following questions:

### Level A, B & C

- Which name speaks to you? Why?
- How might the importance of the temple relate to modern day Jewish people, especially those living in Israel?
- Give other examples that you know from the Bible where God fulfilled his promises to the Israelites.
  
- Read 1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19, and 2 Corinthians 6:16 - What temple needs to be restored with a strong foundation for Christians?

### Optional Study: The Jesus Connection

Compare Ezra 3:2 and Matthew 1:12-13. What did you discover?

## First Things First

If you have an NIV Study Bible it may have a diagram of the temple in Jerusalem. Notice that the altar is outside the temple where sacrifices can be observed by all the people. This is where the people worshiped. Ordinary people were not allowed in the temple.

Read Ezra 3:1-6.

Answer the following questions:

### Level A

- What was the altar used for?
- Why would they build the altar before the foundation of the temple?
- Why is it important to pray and worship God before starting a service project, a mission, or another action?

### Level B

- What do you think was the motivation for building the altar before the foundation of the temple?
- Immediately after the altar was built, what did they do?
- What does this say about their priorities?

### Level C

- Why were sacrifices important to the Israelites?
- By sacrificing before construction on the temple started, were they hedging their bets, following their traditions, or demonstrating their faith? Why do you think so?
- If sacrifices helped connect the Israelites to God, how does Jesus' sacrifice connect Christians to God?

## Mixed Emotions

Once the temple foundation was completed, the Israelites celebrated. It was a noisy celebration that could be heard for miles. There was singing and dancing and trumpets and cymbals and some sorrowful wailing, too. Emotions were strong and permeated the air.

Read Ezra 3:10-13.

Answer the following questions:

### Level A, B, and C

- Why were some folks weeping? Who were they?

- Feelings can't be helped—focus can. What do you think the weeping people were focused on? What were the happy people focused on?
- In our world things change too. Sometimes we are happy about the results, sometimes we are not. Churches are that way, too. When the old building is torn down to build a newer, updated building almost everyone is happy. When the services are changed to be more modern, almost everyone is happy. When the old hymnals are changed to new ones, almost everyone is happy. But, there are always a few who miss the old, the familiar, “the way it used to be.” As in all things, where should the focus be when the church is forced to make changes?

## A Spiritual Foundation

What is a foundation? **Definition:** That on which a building is built; The first layer of a structure that provides a stable base for the superstructure. In Old Testament times the preferred foundation was either bedrock or a solid platform of close fitting cut stone (1 Kings 5:17). This second option is probably what was used for the temple foundation.

For the Israelites, it wasn't just the physical foundation that was missing in their lives. They had been punished by God for their lack of spiritual steadfastness by the destruction of Israel and the Babylonian Captivity (2 Chronicles 36:14-21). In addition, the newest generation had spent their lifetime as an exile from their homeland. For some their faith grew stronger, but for others the temptations and distractions in Babylon continued to erode their faith even further. Persia was a land of many gods. They were captives ruled by a people that did not consider the Hebrew God any more significant than the hundreds of other gods that people around them worshiped. There was a problem of interracial marriage which meant a family divided over religion. The Israelites were charged to keep themselves separate, holy, pure. But that was very hard to do when you didn't have much control over your life. Some felt God had given up on them, so they gave up on God.

Read Psalms 11:3, Ezra 9:6-7, Matthew 7:24-27, and 1 Timothy 6:17-19 .

Answer the following questions:

### Level A

- Why is it important to have a strong foundation for one's faith?
- What things weakened the faith of the Israelites while they were in exile?
- Do Christians still have similar challenges? Give examples.

### Level B

- How had the spiritual foundation of the Israelites been damaged before the exile? (see 2 Chronicles 36:14-21) During the exile?
- How would you explain why some people's faith grows stronger with adversity while the faith of others grows weaker? Which side do you tend to fall on?
- Why is having a strong spiritual foundation important to you?

## Level C

- What do you imagine kept the story of their heritage of faith alive for the exiled Israelites? What keeps your faith strong?
- What are some ways that the spiritual foundation of today's Christians can be eroded? Are there any preventative measures that have worked for you?
- What would you consider to be the top three ways to secure a strong spiritual foundation? How are those available through your church family?