



“This is the Story...”

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Week 25: A Sea of Joy and Celebration

Ezra 4-6

Intro Video: <https://youtu.be/5UFtZExuwqM>

Review the big story: God created the cosmos and humans and called it all good. We were created to live in harmony, but sometimes we miss the mark. All of humanity missed the mark, and they had to live with the consequences, but God stuck with them and continued to love them. Then God called a family to be a blessing to the whole earth. Like the humans before them, the generations of this family often missed the mark, but God was faithful. When the people became slaves in Egypt, God raised up Moses to be their leader. God performed many signs and wonders, and delivered them from slavery. In the wilderness, they learned to be a people of God, trusting in God’s provision, living out God’s commandments, and wrestling with the law in shalom community. As they prepared to go into the promised land, they were given the *shema*, words of love to keep with their whole beings. God gave the people a new leader, Joshua, and through miraculous works brought the people into the promised land. Once there, they had to learn again how to be God’s people. They missed the mark a lot, and God sent judges to guide them. Ordinary people showed creativity and steadfast love in the way they continued the story of the people of God. When the people demanded a king, God sent prophets like Samuel to try to keep the people faithful to God. Kings Saul, David and Solomon continued to miss the mark, and the kingdom divided into the north (Israel) and the south (Judah). God stuck with the people through leaders and prophets like Elijah, Huldah, Josiah and Jeremiah, who continued to call the people back to God, even as first the northern, and then the southern kingdom fell to invading powers. After the kingdoms fell, the people were scattered. Some were left in the ruins of the kingdoms, and some were sent into exile in foreign lands. God continued to work through prophets like Ezekiel and brave, everyday people like Esther to reconcile the people to God, to each other, and to creation.

- **Key verses:** Ezra 5:11-12; Ezra 6:22

Tell the story: The Babylonian empire fell to Persia, and King Cyrus of Persia authorized a return of Jews to Judah. He instructed the returning Jews to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. The other people inhabiting the land weren’t big fans of the building project, and tried to get it stopped by writing to the king(s) (multiple times), but King Darius found the original decree by King Cyrus let it proceed. This was the beginning of a cooperation between Israel and ruling nations, first Persia and then the Roman Empire. The people rebuilt and dedicated the new temple, and celebrated with the passover.

- Read Ezra 5:6-6:2; 6:13-22
- Read page 118 in the *Shine On* story Bible

Prime the pump:

- **Things to notice:**
 - Read Ezra 5:11 - you know the story this refers to! Remember it.
 - In Ezra 5:13, the king is called Cyrus of Babylonia! Why? It seems he went by this for a bit after conquering Babylon.
 - Read Ezra 5:2. Where have you heard these names before? Yes, these two were contemporaries of this story!
 - This is a very political situation! Read back earlier in Ezra if you're intrigued by this. It's not as simple as returning and rebuilding. For example, the building project is funded by Persia. Notice the political turns in the story.

- **Background information:**
 - Ezra and Nehemiah are traditionally read together, even though they are definitely written by at least two different authors. Ezra writes from the perspective of a scribe and priest, and is chiefly interested in the reestablishing of the worship/communal practices. He is known as a "separatist."
 - Ezra is mostly written in Hebrew, but some of this passage is one of two parts that are written in Aramaic. It's only the end of the passage, verses 19-22, that return to Hebrew. Look at the difference of subject matter here to get a clue for the reason for the language switch.

- **Conversation starters:**
 - As the book of Ezra continues, the next focus is on the rebuilding of the community. And then, Nehemiah continues the project with the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem. Discuss possible reasons for this order.
 - Here's another squirmy part of the story. The people who were not exiled (who would have been the commoners, as the elite were the exiles) were treated as second-class citizens when the exiled returned. They were regarded as inauthentic (particularly the Samaritans). They weren't included in the building project. Wrestle with this. Does it change how we read the Ezra text? As we continue in the story, how will this change our reading of the New Testament?

Microsong: "A Sea of Joy and Celebration"

(Listen: <https://youtu.be/OSfY2104j3o>)

Finally God's family rebuilds the temple in Jerusalem. God plunges them into a sea of joy and celebration of Only God. God is One, Only God.

Sing the big song:

(Listen: https://youtu.be/Ri6L4bl_6Ys)

This is the story of how it all began. God made matter, and chaos shattered.

Eve and Adam, they tried to hide. The world got violent and God replied with a mark and flood
and a rainbow sign, God's love written on skin and sky,

Then God called a family to be a blessing to the earth, ohh ohhh

A mother and her favorite son wrestle for the blessing, another son becomes a slave, the land is
saved from famine.

God's family grows. Egypt oppresses. They groan to God, God sends Moses.

Ten strange signs say "Please release them!" By the sea God saves them. Ohh ohhh.

The people complain. God rains bread. Daily food and ten new rules.

Five sisters come and ask for land. God says "Yes, amend the law!"

*Moses says, "In your new life across the Jordan, love God with your whole heart and with all your
being, and your strength, now listen: God is One, only God! God is One, only God!"*

Cross over Jordan, stories and stones. Circuits and shouts and the walls come down.

God sends judges like Deborah and the land has rest.

Ruth's worth more than seven sons; Redeem the lost with steadfast love.

Corruption in the temple, and God sends Samuel.

God gives them a prophet, they ask for a king. Does God need a temple? A wise king forgets.

And when a bully rules the land, the nation tears apart and loses David's heart.....

Through a widow's gift and a prophet's cry. God brings life in desperate times.

Josiah reads a misplaced scroll. He turns to God wholeheartedly like David did.

God gives Jeremiah a picture of God's ruined family...

Is there any hope left, is there any hope left, is there any hope left for you, Jerusalem?

Any hope? Any hope left? Is there any hope left for you, Jerusalem?

By the streams of Babylon, how can we sing when you are gone, Jerusalem... Jerusalem?

I'm in a valley of human bones. These bones are Israel, God's breath is hope.

Haman plans death for Esther's exiles. She risks her life so they might survive.

Finally God's family rebuilds the temple in Jerusalem. God plunges them into a sea of joy and
celebration of Only God. God is One, Only God.

God loves every one of us, it's true, and God loves the universe.

Go do your household project!