

COMMUNITY GROUP QUESTIONS FOR EZRA

- 1) Have you ever had the opportunity to return to a place of your childhood (e.g., an old family home, a favorite vacation spot, a school or playground, a theme park, etc.)? What were your thoughts and impressions?

- 2) It had been 70 years since the children of Israel were in the land of Israel. Some were very young when they left. For most, this was the first time they had seen their homeland, and all they knew was what the past generations had told them. As they arrived in Jerusalem with the intent of rebuilding the temple, what do you think their thoughts and fears were?

- 3) Between the end of the story in II Chronicles 36:11-21 and the story in Ezra (II Chronicles 36:22 to Ezra 1:1-6), God does some amazing things. Over the ensuing 70 years, the hearts of the people of Israel are changed toward God and God gives them favor with Cyrus, one of the kings of Persia. In II Chronicles 36:20&21, the writer describes one reason why the children of Israel were removed from the land for 70 years. What is the reason? One of the spiritual disciplines taught in our church is to observe the sabbath. Have you ever observed the sabbath? If not, why not? If so, share with the group what that experience has been like. What made it difficult? What were the benefits?

- 4) Based on Cyrus' command, a group of over 40,000 Israelites travels to Jerusalem and they begin the work of rebuilding the temple. Unfortunately, circumstances change, kings come and go, there is opposition to rebuilding the temple. Letters are written and the work stops. Read Ezra 4:24-5:5 and Haggai 1:1-15. What stands out to you about how the people of Israel are living and what the Lord is doing? Discuss your thoughts on why it isn't easy to accomplish what God has given us to do. Did God the Father make Jesus' life easy?

- 5) At the building of the tabernacle in Exodus 40 and at the completion of the temple Solomon built in I Kings 8, there is an extraordinary display of God's presence and glory. Sadly, as the people of Israel stop following the Lord, God's special presence and His glory depart from the temple, as described in Ezekiel 10 & 11. When the temple is dedicated in Ezra 6:14-18, there is no mention of a cloud or of the glory of the Lord filling the temple. Why do you think God did not make a visible display of filling the temple when it was dedicated in Ezra 6? Are there any parallels in our individual spiritual lives and in the life of the church, as we walk with the Lord?

- 6) Unlike the first group of over 40,000 people who come to Jerusalem from Babylon, in chapter 8, Ezra is planning to take a group of just under 1,800 men with their families. They will also be carrying a lot of gold, silver and bronze. Since they have been captives for the last 70 years, it is unlikely that any of them have been trained to fight in battle or that they would be entrusted with weapons. It is approximately a 600 to 700 mile journey, depending on the route, with many places where raiding bands could attack. As a result of the life of Daniel and his friends, Esther's life and the lives of others, the God of Israel has gained a reputation for protecting and delivering His people. In Ezra 8:21-23, Ezra describes the situation he is in and what he decides to do about it. What does Ezra do and how would you feel in this situation? Have you ever fasted and prayed for God to do something? Share with the group what the situation was and how things turned out. How did things turn out for Ezra (Ezra 8:31-32)?
- 7) Beginning in chapter 9, Ezra becomes aware of a problem with the Israelites who have returned to the land of Israel from Babylon. The people have intermarried with the non-Israeli nations around them. This was specifically commanded against in the Law (Deut. 7:3-4) and by Joshua (Josh. 23:12-16) because it would lead to an even greater sin. What was that greater sin and what did God say would be the punishment for it? Think about and discuss how these "stepping stone" sins work in our lives, how they lead to even greater sin and how they are related to the ultimate sin of idolatry – worshipping and trusting in other gods. Pray for each other to have the courage to say "yes" to God's commands and "no" to little and big compromises this week.