

Ezra Introduction and Chapters 1-2 John Karmelich

1. Ever been in a situation where you felt like you're starting life over again? Maybe the loss of some person close to you or a divorce? Even moving to a new place to start life new would work as we deal with the issue of starting new. That's what we're going to get in Ezra, on a grand scale.
 - a) Let me set the scene. The Israelites living in that land were taken into captivity 50 to 70 years prior to when this chapter started. Now some of them are moving from the Persian Empire back to Israel. It was estimated to be a 4-6 month journey, so this is a big deal.
 - b) I would think that if one is starting over, the first thing one has to do is understand what the situation like. That's essentially Chapter 1. The next step is to take inventory of what's going with you. In essence that's Chapter 2, as it's mainly a list of names as well as things that made the journey back to Israel. Yes there's more to it, or we'd be done now.
2. With that said, let's get back to us. When we're starting over, first we have to understand what is the situation. Then we too, must understand what is (or who is) coming with us and what do we need for that trip. Then the "fun begins" of starting over. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah both focus on that "starting over" issue. Ezra will focus on building God's temple again. Nehemiah is mainly focused on building the city of Jerusalem again.
3. Gee John, that's all well and good. Maybe one day if I'm starting all over again, I'll read this stuff again from that perspective. Until then, why don't you hit us with the "why should we care" part as we know you're dying to tell us! In effect, the whole Christian life is about "starting over". Yes, the beginning of the Christian life is commonly called being "Born Again". Yes that implies we're to be "starting over" at whatever age, where we're now dedicating our lives to be used for Jesus as to further build up His kingdom (in other words, make a difference for Him in our lives). What I am getting at is, as we read this book and Nehemiah, don't think well good for them, glad they are starting fresh again. Think about these books in terms of how we can continue to use our lives for Him as we start afresh each day working for Him.
4. Now that I've got my lofty introduction out of my system, what do you say we focus on the who, what, when and why's of this book. Always a good way to start the series.
 - a) The who is Ezra. He is a priest and one of the people who made the trip to Israel to start a new life in that land. He wasn't "the" leader coming back. In fact his own return isn't until the second half the book which scholars estimate was sixty years later. Ezra did write this book and most likely he wrote the book of Nehemiah as well. It is a Jewish tradition that he wrote both of them (he's listed as the author here in Chapter 7 but he's not listed as the author in Nehemiah). Jewish tradition is he's the one who put the book of Chronicles (1st and 2nd) together. So if you hate reading all those names in those Chronicles, now you know who's to blame!
 - b) The "when" is the end of the seventy-year captivity. It's about 538 BC. If you don't know you're Middle East history, the Israelites were conquered by an empire called Babylon. It fell to another empire made up of two nations called the Medes and the Persians. History calls it "The Persian Empire". It lasted about two hundred years until Alexander the Great came on the scene and who conquered most of its territory.
 - c) One of the key moments in Middle East history is that the first Persian Emperor made the command that the Jewish people can return to their homeland. Not all of them did as the number is a little over 40,000 men plus their wives and children made the initial journey. Bottom line is this book takes place in Israel after that group made that long journey back to the land of Israel. Keep in mind "Israel" was part of the Persian Empire at that time.
 - d) The "why" is to start a fresh. For religious Jewish people the first order of business at that time would be to rebuild God's temple. That's the main topic of this book. An underlying message for you and me has to do with starting fresh in our lives worshipping God. That of all things leads me back to the issue of being "born again".

5. To explain why this is so significant, let me use an illustration I got from Rick Warren (leader of Saddleback Church) not too far from me. He says that when we become "Born again" God forms a "beachhead" (so to speak) inside of us as it is His desire to take over every aspect of our lives.
- a) My point here is living the Christian life is all about starting over. It is all about living life as God desires we live it. In effect it's about "starting over" using our lives to live to do His will as we go through our lives. In effect, the history of the Israelites is about failure. That is the failure to please God based on their efforts. They went from a powerful entity under King David and his son Solomon to a group that disobeyed God so much it was necessary to wipe them out completely and let them get conquered. So what do we do when our old life as we know it dies? We start afresh by trusting God and using our lives to honor Him with it. That's why the "first order of business" when the Israelites got back there was for them to build the temple. It was their way of honoring Him as being in charge. Are there going to be problems? Of course. Welcome to life! He never promises life goes smoothly, if we turn our lives over to Him. He just promises to guide us so we can make a difference for Him with our lives.
6. With that said, let me describe what's going on in these first two chapters.
- a) Chapter 1 is fairly short and almost identical to what is written in the final chapter of the Second Chronicles. (By the way "Chronicles" is technically one book, but it was too large to fit on one scroll, so that's why there is First and Second Chronicles.) This chapter gives us the decree by the Persian Emperor saying in effect, "God is God and He made it clear to me to let the Jewish people return to their homeland along with "their stuff" to rebuild His temple. Whether or not that emperor became a Jewish believer or he was just doing it to grow in his popularity is debated. The point is he said it. It gave the Israelites the ability to return to their homeland, so off they went.
 - b) I should also share that Daniel may have been key here. He became the top official under the Babylonians and when the Persians took over Babylon, Daniel again was the top man (except the emperor). The Jewish historian Josephus says that Daniel showed the Persian leader an old scroll (100-200 years old) by Isaiah. In that scroll, Isaiah (44:28) states Cyrus, who was the Persian Emperor would be the one to set the Israelites free. Josephus states it was Daniel who read that scroll to Cyrus. The emperor was so impressed by that, he gave us "Chapter 1" (a decree) to set the Israelites free. Anyway, that's Chapter 1 in a nutshell.
 - c) Chapter 2 is much longer. In fact it's 70 verses. It's mostly names of the people who made that journey. You can tell Ezra's the author of Chronicles because he loves to lists names! The good news is we don't have to memorize all those names. God's not going to quiz us on them when we get to heaven. They're given not only to say, "Who made the trip", but what service they'll be providing when they get there. For example, musicians are listed as well as gatekeepers. I'm just saying when we "start over" duties have to be assigned.
7. If you haven't figured it out by now, my lesson title is "starting over". As we study this chapter, I am not interesting in having you memorize a whole verses about names of people who died over 2,500 years ago. I am interested in teaching all of us what "starting over" in Jesus is all about. I'm well aware most of us are veteran Christians and in that sense we stared over a long time ago. We still have to pass that idea onto others, as that's what the great commission is all about. Hopefully we'll all pick up a few thoughts on living the Christian life that we haven't considered before or at the least haven't considered it in a long time. Just as the Israelites new life required them to grasp "the game plan" (Chapter 1) and how to divide up the roles to accomplish that plan (Chapter 2) so we as Christians must also grasp our game plan (i.e., the Great Commission) and what is our role in completing that commission. That is to use our spiritual gifts to make a difference for Jesus as we go through our lives. Therefore, "starting over" should hit home for all of us!
- a) With all that said, it's time to begin our journey through Ezra. I also hope you join me as I go through Nehemiah after we get through this fairly short book. OK, let's get started on the verse-by-verse commentary on Ezra.

8. Ezra Chapter 1, Verse 1: In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing:
- a) Let's begin with a few historical facts. Jeremiah is long dead at this point in history. In his book, he predicted the Babylonian captivity would last exactly 70 years. Beginning when Israel (the Southern Kingdom) was destroyed by that empire until "Verse 1" here's exactly seventy years. If you don't know your history, the Babylonian Empire was conquered by another empire based out of what is Iran today (Babylon is in Iraq today). All we have to know for this lesson is the "new big boys on the block" called the Persians (for short) does control a vast empire that essentially was from Greece to India. Yes the land of Israel was also part of their territory and remains so even after this decree was made.
 - b) Cyrus was the first king of that empire. The simple point here is Jeremiah's words did get fulfilled "to the day" as in the first order of business for this new emperor was to let all the Jewish people return to their homeland. As we'll find out later in the lesson, only a small percentage took up that offer. Why so small a group? Keep in mind, this was a 4-6 month dangerous trip to make. Also Israelites were now "comfortable" living in the Babylonian and now in the Persian Empire. Also the land of Israel was still part of the Persian Empire. Anyway, only a small percentage of the Israelites took up that offer.
 - c) It'd be best to repeat and expand what I said in my introduction here: The prophet Daniel was alive when this decree was made. He was unusual in that he was a top official under the Babylonians, yet the Persians respected this "old man" (probably pushing ninety when this occurred). He was brought out of retirement to be the top official under Cyrus, again the first Persian Emperor. What I'm about to share isn't in the bible: A Jewish historian by the name of Josephus records this story. It's about the fact that the prophet Isaiah over 100 years earlier mentioned Cyrus by name. Isaiah said Cyrus would set the Israelites free. It was written before the whole Babylonian thing began! Daniel showed Cyrus the passage from Isaiah. He was so impressed that it led to "Verse 1". Again, the bible doesn't record all of this, but it fits in the facts here so it's definitely probable that it happened that way. Daniel himself didn't make the return trip, probably due to age and the fact he worked as a "top dog" in the Persian Empire. (See Daniel Chapter 6 for some of these details.)
 - i) Given the fact that the empire covered a vast territory, I suspect for those reasons the king couldn't publicly declare himself "Jewish" although he could respect the God of the Israelites based on what Isaiah wrote. (Just my opinion here!)
 - d) Anyway, the emperor made a decree for the Israelites to go home, so Chapter 1 describes that decree for us. Time for the important question: Why should we care? The answer is it ties to my lesson theme of "starting over". The first step to start over is to grasp what is the situation. What can we do and what does God want us to do by starting over? Yes it's a decree by the emperor, and I'd say that's a pretty good clue to get moving. But we don't get such decrees. So how do we know when it's time to start over? Sometimes it's just a desire God puts into us. Sometimes it's pure logic. God wants us to use our lives to make a difference for Him and often He guides us through prayer, His word and circumstances to move on to something new. Here we see the Israelites "marching order" in the bible.
 - e) One final thought before moving on. If this decree was made, why did so many Israelites choose to stay behind? Obviously they got comfortable in their new lives. Yes the journey was dangerous in those days. It's also a model of "many are called and few are chosen".
 - i) Let me address "staying behind". For example, not all Christians are called to be a missionary in a foreign country. All Christians are called to be a witness where we are, but not all are called to "pick up and go" a long distance. However, we should support believers who do make those commitments. Obviously we can't afford to help everybody. Still that shouldn't stop us from doing something or at the least, I would say it's essential to pray for those on the "front lines".

9. Verse 2: "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: " `The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. ³ Anyone of his people among you--may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem.
- a) My first thought is this emperor sure sounds like a devout Jewish person at this point. I've grown up to be nervous about politicians making statements. He may have been sincere. He may also simply wanted to earn the favor of the Jewish people since he ruled over that group and Daniel was his "top guy" over that kingdom..
 - b) Notice in Verse 3, the Israelites were not forced to go, "Anyone of his people" reads like a request, not an order. Again the Persian Empire was a vast territory. Yet here we read of the emperor saying in effect, "I rule over everyplace I can think of. Yet there is a God who rules over the world, and God ordered me to request that the Jewish people return to their homeland to rebuild the temple that the Babylonians destroyed. Anyway, here I am doing what the bible said I was going to do, so get going!"
 - c) Scholars will not claim that Cyrus became Jewish. He just "sounded Jewish here" as to let the Israelites return there again, as part of his empire. Obviously he respected God as the request emphasizes who God was. Again Daniel was his "right hand man". I'm sure that had a lot to do with it. Enough of that, time for more details.
10. Verse 4: And the people of any place where survivors may now be living are to provide him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.' "
- a) Translation: Cyrus is requesting that non-Jewish "neighbors" of those making this journey give stuff to the travelers so accomplish this task! All this means is the Israelites who were making this journey were not to go empty handed. Won't it be dangerous to travel that far a distance with all that valuable stuff? Of course. That's why praying for protection is a necessity for such a long trip on the back of animals!
 - b) This leads me back to "starting over". I find that when we're willing to use our lives to do a work for God, He won't provide us with "tons of gold, etc., but God makes it possible to do what we need to do. Does that mean we stand still and He rains down stuff on us? No we still have to "work" to prepare for what's new. I'm just saying God works in our life to make the "changes" possible that He desires of our lives.
 - c) OK enough background. Time for the "Israelites" to get moving!
11. Verse 5: Then the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and Levites--everyone whose heart God had moved--prepared to go up and build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem. ⁶ All their neighbors assisted them with articles of silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with valuable gifts, in addition to all the freewill offerings.
- a) Time for a "twenty second history lesson". The Israelites split into two separate kingdoms long before the Babylonians came on the scene. The "North One" was conquered over 100 years prior to the Babylonians conquering the "South One". The Israelites were originally divided up into 12 "territories" based on the fact they were in "12 tribes" as their "founder" had 12 sons. The "South One" who the Babylonians conquered was the territory of Judah and Benjamin. One of the 12 tribes was called to be the priests of the other tribes and they were spread all over the Israelite territory. That was the tribe of Levi. Realize by the time the Israelites were conquered some people from North Israel probably lived in the South territory so it's not a "perfect" split that way.
 - b) Often we'll talk about the fact we get an "overwhelming urge" to do something. We tend to forget that God is more than capable of putting those urges in us. That's what Verse 5 is implying. God put it in the heart of many Israelites to make this trip. Obviously many Israelites were comfortable in that empire and didn't make it. Those who's hearts wanted to make the trip assumedly did it assuming fear didn't overtake them!

- c) Verse 6 is a "gentile" verse. This is about non-Jewish people giving gifts to them. So why would they do that? Let's just say that when an emperor gives an order, it's dangerous to disobey it! Therefore non-Jewish people gave parting gifts to the travelers.
 - d) I'd like you to consider the verses another way. As Christians we're all called to use our lives to make a difference for Jesus. If we're not on the "front lines" going out on the road to make a difference for Him, we need to be on the "back line" supporting them. That is a nice way to spiritualize these verses as the non-travelers supported those making the trip.
12. Verse 7: Moreover, King Cyrus brought out the articles belonging to the temple of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and had placed in the temple of his god. ⁸ Cyrus king of Persia had them brought by Mithredath the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazzar the prince of Judah.
- a) Since the king was in a "giving mood" he got into the act himself. Yes, it didn't cost him a lot, but he did dip into the king's treasure chest to pull out stuff that was taken from when Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the temple about forty years earlier if memory is correct.
 - b) Keep in mind it was a custom in those days when a city was conquered, the losing side "god" statues were placed in the treasury of the winning side, as to indicate which god's really in charge. For Cyrus to let go of the Jewish things, is not a sign of surrender, but as I stated, I think he was impressed by Daniel and the Isaiah scroll and figured he better be "putting his money where his mouth is" so to speak. As my long term regulars know, that is one of my favorite expressions. I'm not impressed with "Christians" who will just show up to church every now and then. I'm impressed with people who put their money where their mouth is! As the old Christian bumper sticker says, "I tithe my income for Jesus, any idiot can honk!" (By the way, I believe in giving, but I'll argue Christians aren't under the law so I won't go the "tithing" route here.)
 - c) Anyway, Cyrus not only took out all the "dishes and utensils" that got used in the temple service, but he had the official treasurer "count it out" as to show he's returning all of that to Jerusalem. Stop and consider what a "witness" this had to be to all those millions that lived in that empire. It stretched from the border of Greece, to Egypt to India. It was vast as they conquered a lot of territory and inherited a lot from the Babylonians. Now here is the emperor of this great territory making a public proclamation to the entire empire, that the Israelites (probably a relatively small group of that empire) was free to go home along with all their stuff! Plus their neighbors should give them parting gifts. My point is we're seeing the emperor take a strong stand for the Jewish God.
 - d) Finally a few quick words about "Sheshbazzar" while I'm here. Apparently this guy was a grandson) of one of the final kings of Israel (Jehoiachin). Remember that all those "South" kings were descendants of King David. The line was still in "tact" so to speak. Remember the Israelites were not going back as to start another kingdom. They were still part of that Persian Empire. What this does show us is when the Babylonians conquered that land the Israelites were allowed to take along their family records. It's important as it proves Jesus came from the Davidic line. That's how it was possible for Matthew and Luke to trace all those family records that still existed at the time they wrote their gospels. Now you know.
13. Verse 9: This was the inventory: gold dishes 30 silver dishes 1,000 silver pans 29 ¹⁰ gold bowls 30 matching silver bowls 410 other articles 1,000 ¹¹ In all, there were 5,400 articles of gold and of silver. Sheshbazzar brought all these along when the exiles came up from Babylon to Jerusalem.
- a) Remember that this lesson is about starting over. That means one has to take into account of what one is starting over with. Yes it involves counting people too, and we'll get to that as we start the next chapter.
 - b) Hundreds of years earlier, when King Solomon built the temple, there were mentions and implications of tools used for the temple service, but they weren't numbered like they are here. Think of it this way: When one studies the tabernacle and the temple, animals were "BBQ" a lot there. Many animals were killed for sacrifices for different purposes.

- i) Plus there were food and incense that was offered. My point is between set up, service and clean up that activity would require lots of stuff to carry and transport those items in and out of the temple. Not to mention there were lots of bathing rituals and cleaning of things. All I'm saying is when we read of 5,400 articles of gold and silver used in one capacity or the other for the temple, I'm not shocked by all of that.
 - ii) This is very "inside baseball". Why should we care? If we want to use our lives for God's service we need to take inventory of what is separated for His use.
 - c) One of the important principals in the bible is the concept of "Holiness". It describes when a "thing" is separated for God's use. My favorite example would be if there's a plate that's only used for one specific person, it's "separated" for that person. The idea of "Holiness" is to separate what's for God's use and not use it for "everyday" usage. OK John that's neat. Tell me as I go through my Christian life, how do I apply that? No I'm not saying we got to take some "gold and silver things" from our house and give them to God. The principal is what we do for God, we do for God and we separate those things for Him. For example as I write these lessons I try to keep in mind the goal is to please Him with it. The readers are the "bonus". Do I mess up? Yes I'm human. Still we live with the concept that what is separated for God is well separated for Him.
 - d) As I mentioned in the last Jeremiah lesson there's no mention of the Ark of the Covenant, which is essentially a gold covered box with two angel statues on top. It represented the presence of God. Some theorize that Jeremiah hid it before the Babylonians destroyed the temple. There is an island in Ethiopia that has either "it" or a replica of it. The truth is we don't know what happened to it. My simple point here is it's not listed among the stuff.
 - e) Now that we got the "stuff" inventoried for the trip, it's time to talk about the people who made the trip.
14. Chapter 2, Verse 1: Now these are the people of the province who came up from the captivity of the exiles, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had taken captive to Babylon (they returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town, ² in company with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum and Baanah):
- a) First a name clarification. Zerubbabel may be the same guy as Sheshbazzar. Some will argue one guy replaced the other. It's a minor point but it confuses some people as one is named as the leader and then another is named as the leader. I'll let it go now as we move on to the issues around Chapter 2.
 - b) Let me warn you right now, that Chapter 2 is full of names, lots of them. I'm positive that when we get to heaven, God's not going to go, "OK name all the people who traveled back to Jerusalem with their leaders". The names are here as Ezra was taking inventory as who is making the trip. The reason it's in the bible, I'm convinced is that God loves obedience and those who were obedient to Him. Here are these people along with all listed here in Chapter 2 who made a 4-6 month journey from the Persian empire back to Israel. Let me give a couple of quick notes:
 - i) The guy listed first as a said was a descendant of King David.
 - ii) The guy listed second was the "High Priest". We know this because Haggi which is a small Old Testament prophesy book if you didn't know, he preached to those Israelites when they first came back to encourage them to build the temple. He is the one who referred to Jeshua as the high priest. That name is the same root for who we call Jesus, (a Latin derivative). The point is the kingly line as well as the priestly line led the procession.
 - iii) Obviously, God doesn't call us of us to lead, but someone does and they're listed early in the list.
 - iv) Then we got a few other names. Nehemiah is named, but it isn't "that one" since he didn't come on the scene for a good number of years later.

- c) Just to warn you, I'm going to go pretty quickly through the rest of the names. Yes God is grateful for each of them risking their lives to make the trip just as God delights when we use our lives to make a difference for Him as well. Names are listed because God cares for those people just as He cares for us.
 - d) I have to admit I've always wondered about the phrase "Lamb's book of life". Those of us who know our bible believe it refers to the names of saved people. Even religious Jewish people refer to the save as listed in the "Lamb's book of life". I bring it up here because as I read all of these saved people, it makes me wonder if I am listed and how do we know?
 - i) The answer is if one believes Jesus is God died for all our sins and He's Lord of our lives, then we're in that book. I'm getting into all of this simply because as we read all of these names in this chapter, realize that if we're in that book, God cares about our name as much as all of these guys.
 - ii) Of course there's more to this chapter than a list of names. Let's continue:
15. Verse 2 (cont.): The list of the men of the people of Israel: ³ the descendants of Parosh 2,172 ⁴ of Shephatiah 372 ⁵ of Arah 775 ⁶ of Pahath-Moab (through the line of Jeshua and Joab) 2,812 ⁷ of Elam 1,254 ⁸ of Zattu 945 ⁹ of Zaccai 760 ¹⁰ of Bani 642 ¹¹ of Bebai 623 ¹² of Azgad 1,222 ¹³ of Adonikam 666 ¹⁴ of Bigvai 2,056 ¹⁵ of Adin 454 ¹⁶ of Ater (through Hezekiah) 98 ¹⁷ of Bezai 323 ¹⁸ of Jorah 112 ¹⁹ of Hashum 223 ²⁰ of Gibbar 95 ²¹ the men of Bethlehem 123 ²² of Netophah 56 ²³ of Anathoth 128 ²⁴ of Azmaveth 42 ²⁵ of Kiriath Jearim, Kephirah and Beeroth 743 ²⁶ of Ramah and Geba 621 ²⁷ of Micmash 122 ²⁸ of Bethel and Ai 223 ²⁹ of Nebo 52 ³⁰ of Magbish 156 ³¹ of the other Elam 1,254 ³² of Harim 320 ³³ of Lod, Hadid and Ono 725 ³⁴ of Jericho 345 ³⁵ of Senaah 3,630.
- a) Thank God for cut and paste. There's an old joke among pastors that if you pronounce a name with conviction, people are going to assume you're right and who's going to argue with you? All you have to know here is we got a big bunch of names of men who made the journey west.
 - b) What's not stated, but is logical is there must have been women and children who also did the journey. So why are only the male names listed? It was the "times", deal with it!
 - c) Here's something else to consider. If the Israelites were gone for a generation, let's face it, there will be squatters on the land saying, "too bad you lost out, it's ours now!" That's the reason we see towns mentioned as well as names of people. It's show when they show up they can say, this is our history here, oh, and by the way, Emperor Cyrus ordered us to be here, so get off our land! The squatters didn't exactly leave as we'll see in the next lesson.
 - d) Plus there's a strength in numbers issue. For a caravan to travel hundreds of miles with a good number of women, children, supplies, an animals is a dangerous journey. Plus all of that gold and silver, so it took God's blessing for that caravan to make it.
 - e) And I should care about all these names because? It shows the literalness of Israel being a resurrected nation. It implies the hardships and the practical issues involved in starting a fresh. Keep in mind if ever we have to start afresh, we too must take inventory of stuff as well as people and plan out where we're going and where we'll stop. OK then, many more unpronounceable names to go!
16. Verse 36: The priests: the descendants of Jedaiah (through the family of Jeshua) 973 ³⁷ of Immer 1,052 ³⁸ of Pashhur 1,247 ³⁹ of Harim 1,017 ⁴⁰ The Levites: the descendants of Jeshua and Kadmiel (through the line of Hodaviah) 74.
- a) Time for a quick lecture on "Priests and Levites". It's important as it'll lead back to what is written in these verses. First as most of you know, Israel was divided into 12 tribes. God said the "Levites" were to be the priests to the other tribes. The basic role of the priest was to help people draw closer to God. As I jokingly said many years ago, "If a young man in the Jewish faith was born a Levite and said, "Hey Dad I want to buy and sell camels for a living." Dad would say, "You're a Levite, off to seminary you go!" The point is some were called to this profession whether they were crazy about the idea or not!

- b) The reason it's significant to us, is "Many are called by God but few are chosen" as Jesus Himself said that in Matthew 22:14". God calls many of us to draw close to Him. Lots of Christians do and many only do "minimal commitments". It's sort of a model of what the priesthood was like. Speaking of priests:
- c) A "subset" of the Levites were the descendants of Aaron. They were specifically called to be the priests. The rest of the Levites were to assist them in their duties. So all the priests were Levites but not all Levites were priests. So you know in modern Judaism any person who's Jewish in faith can train to be a priest. I'm talking "Back then" not today.
- d) All of this leads back to the verses. Notice a good number of priests made that return trip to Israel but only a few other Levites did. Compare the numbers in Verse 36 with those in Verse 37. Lots of lectures have been given on that fact. Remember that the main purpose to return to Israel (OK, the first purpose) was to start "Temple Worship" again. Yes, those priests would be "top dogs" again so they may have been excited to return. The rest of the Levites were only assistants, which is why many suspect only a small number returned.
- e) I know almost nothing about classical music. I do remember an orchestra leader once give a lecture that the hardest position to fill in an orchestra is "second violin". Everybody who plays violin wants to lead. Being a follower is the challenge! So were the priests able to do their job without an adequate number of Levites to assist? We assume so.
- f) If you don't know the first six chapters of this book take place about 60 years prior to the last four chapters. The Israelites got "lazy" in rebuilding the Temple itself. That's why we read of the bible books by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah who came at that time!
- g) Anyway, the "Inventory" to go back had a good number of priests and a few Levites. Also keep in mind that not everyone settled in Jerusalem. Earlier in this chapter, the names we read also included the names of towns in Israel. Going back meant resettling all over that land and dealing with those "squatting there at that time".
- h) Since I'm discussing Israel's geography at the time of the return. The area that they settled in was about 25 miles by 30 miles. After the Babylonians conquered Israel some Edomites (they lived just east of the Dead Sea) settled in the southern part of what's Israel today.
 - i) Just trying to give you an idea of how small an area was settled after they returned to that area. However, it's got nothing to do with the priests and Levites, so I'll go to the next set of verses!

17. Verse 41: The singers: the descendants of Asaph 128 ⁴² The gatekeepers of the temple: the descendants of Shallum, Ater, Talmon, Akkub, Hatita and Shobai 139 ⁴³ The temple servants: the descendants of Ziha, Hasupha, Tabbaoth, ⁴⁴ Keros, Siaha, Padon, ⁴⁵ Lebanah, Hagabah, Akkub, ⁴⁶ Hagab, Shalmal, Hanan, ⁴⁷ Giddel, Gahar, Reaiah, ⁴⁸ Rezin, Nekoda, Gazzam, ⁴⁹ Uzza, Paseah, Besai, ⁵⁰ Asnah, Meunim, Nephussim, ⁵¹ Bakbuk, Hakupha, Harhur, ⁵² Bazluth, Mehida, Harsha, ⁵³ Barkos, Sisera, Temah, ⁵⁴ Neziah and Hatipha
- a) One thing that impressed me is how many people stayed in the "family business". We get the impression that if dad, grandpa, etc. were Israelite gatekeepers, then their children stuck to what they were trained to do. It also indicates me when they went into captivity, fathers still trained their children on their jobs. I assume it became known what Jeremiah predicted so these Israelites "prepared" by teaching the next generation the jobs that ran in the family. Stop and consider that Israel was in ruins. So working the gate required building the towns back up.
 - b) A similar thought for the singers. Obviously they still had to pay the bills. What I suspect it simply means is if the gift of singing ran in those families, they were trained on how the traditional songs went and how temple singers were supposed to function. Yes the local synagogues had to be formed and singers were needed as well as priests. The point is the people returning were preparing to worship God when they got there. Did they think the trip would be hard? Or course, but the training to be of service to God was still there! For us if we're going to serve God some way, the training is always a part of it.

18. Verse 55: The descendants of the servants of Solomon: the descendants of Sotai, Hassophereth, Peruda,⁵⁶ Jaala, Darkon, Giddel,⁵⁷ Shephatiah, Hattil, Pokereth-Hazzebaim and Ami⁵⁸ The temple servants and the descendants of the servants of Solomon 392
- a) The theory is these were originally slave families that became Jewish citizens long before a fall of that country occurred. Since the purpose of going there was to rebuild the temple, I would argue these families did other things like security over the temple. Again we've got a pattern of seeing those needed for temple service volunteering to make this long journey to be a part of it.
 - b) The bottom line is these people were trained by their families to be temple servants and when the opportunity to return came, they showed their loyalty to God to "do so".
19. Verse 59: The following came up from the towns of Tel Melah, Tel Harsha, Kerub, Addon and Immer, but they could not show that their families were descended from Israel:⁶⁰ The descendants of Delaiah, Tobiah and Nekoda 652⁶¹ And from among the priests: The descendants of Hobaiah, Hakkoz and Barzillai (a man who had married a daughter of Barzillai the Gileadite and was called by that name).⁶² These searched for their family records, but they could not find them and so were excluded from the priesthood as unclean.⁶³ The governor ordered them not to eat any of the most sacred food until there was a priest ministering with the Urim and Thummim.
- a) The last group of people mentioned didn't weren't able to trace their family history based on the records that were kept in the temple and taken with them to Babylon. Among this group were some claiming to be priests, but they couldn't prove they were Levites. What the issue is, they could return and they claimed to worship God but to be a priest, one has to be born into it, (think "born again) and you get why they weren't let in.
 - b) The issue has nothing to do with them returning. The issue is Israelites were required to give a portion of what they earned to the priest for their own survival. Because this group couldn't prove their heritage, the Israelites were not about to "bend the rules" just because they claim they were priests.
 - c) Solution: The Urim and the Thummin? What is that? If you know tell me. It goes back to the book of Exodus (28:30). Whatever they were, the High Priest kept them inside what we would call a breastplate. My best guess, they were two small stones. The idea is those two stones were either used as dice and God's will was determined by rolling them or the solution could have been as simple as one meant "yes" and one meant "no". The reason it was done this way is to say in effect, if the same answer came up over and over again, the result must be God ordained. Are the one's mentioned in Verse 63 here the same ones we read of in Exodus? I doubt it. It's one of those speculation things.
 - i) What I suspect it means for us is when the obvious solution can't be found it we've got to make a random choice, to me the solution is to pray it through, ask God for the wisdom to make the right decision and then make a choice.
 - ii) OK then, we're almost there.
20. Verse 64: The whole company numbered 42,360,⁶⁵ besides their 7,337 menservants and maidservants; and they also had 200 men and women singers.⁶⁶ They had 736 horses, 245 mules,⁶⁷ 435 camels and 6,720 donkeys.
- a) Keep in mind the number of people who traveled back to Israel was probably twice what we read here if one includes women and children. The men were counted along with the women who sang in the choir. The purpose here isn't to name everyone, just those called to be of God's service as "Temple Worship" was being set up again.
 - b) So why list the animals? Again part of it was inventory. It also showed that most of those people had to walk that 4-6 month journey or take their turns riding. Considering that the population of Israel grew to several million by the time of Jesus, it shows how God works with a small group and grows them to be a people who would serve Him.

21. Verse 68: When they arrived at the house of the LORD in Jerusalem, some of the heads of the families gave freewill offerings toward the rebuilding of the house of God on its site. ⁶⁹ According to their ability they gave to the treasury for this work 61,000 drachmas of gold, 5,000 minas of silver and 100 priestly garments.
- a) Keep in mind the city of Jerusalem was in ruins when they arrived. Some of the returning people said, we're going to give to rebuild the temple.
 - b) Let me share something that may be relevant here. When Solomon's temple stood, the cost to build it in today's dollars was several billion dollars. What we have here is a small start to rebuild a temple to "The" God. However, one has to start somewhere and I'm positive God is grateful for that giving. Remember that all of these Israelites returning could think, "Wait a minute I have to start from scratch here. I need all I could use for myself. Yet, we read of them giving of what they had to make a difference for God.
 - c) That to me is what giving is all about. To me it's not about giving 10% or whatever figure, it's about one's heart toward God and wanting to see His kingdom rebuilt. As I also love to say, "It's about putting our money where our mouth is" and the Israelites were doing it here in these verses.
 - d) Let's be honest, this whole chapter is pretty boring stuff about names of people who died a long time ago. The great lesson here is not about learning their names or even what was their functions. It was about their willingness to use their lives and their resources making a difference for God. What's important to me is not claiming to be a Christian. It's about what I did with my time and resources and if I used them to make a difference for Him. I never claim to be perfect and I have hobbies and interests too. I'm also not saying that I'm getting into heaven because I did "This or that". I'm saying the evidence that I believe that He died for my sins, is in charge of my life and is God can be proved by putting our time, and money where our mouth is so to speak. In a sense, that's the most important thing to get out of this lesson.
 - e) Rates, one verse left. I hate when I get on a roll before finishing all the verses!
22. Verse 70: The priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers and the temple servants settled in their own towns, along with some of the other people, and the rest of the Israelites settled in their towns.
- a) The last simple point is to realize that not everyone settled in Jerusalem. They had to live in tents while their built homes for themselves and their families. Yes these people could have all settled in Jerusalem and just worked on a New Temple. What I suspect the point is, is that God wants his priests, servants and those town officials to be where His people are so together we can all serve Him.
 - b) With that positive point made, time to wrap up this lesson.
23. Heavenly Father, We thank You that You've separated us to be used by You to make a difference for Your kingdom. Help us not to waste the opportunities you give us. Help us to gain wisdom through Your Word and through prayer so that we make a difference for You. Make it obvious to us how it is You desire to use our lives for Your glory. May the Spirit guide us as we go forth as a witness for You. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen!