

EZRA DEVOTIONAL

By Pastor Phil Emerson

NAME: _____

OUR DISCIPLESHIP FLOW

At Emmanuel Church, we are passionate about living out the call to be disciples of Jesus Christ, and make it our goal to see His Kingdom come in our lives and the world in which we live. We recognise that in Biblical times, a disciple was someone who followed a teacher or rabbi, not simply to gain head knowledge to pass an examination, but to be fully immersed in the life of the rabbi, and *learn his ways*, so that they in turn could replicate this to the world around them. As Christians, we are now those who have been invited to 'follow' Jesus and all of His ways, and we therefore call ourselves His disciples.

"This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did." 1 John 2:5,6

We therefore want to take seriously the words of Jesus in Matthew 28:19-20 to make disciples and also commit to an ongoing journey of teaching and discipleship together.

We all have differing personalities and learning styles. At Emmanuel, we recognise this diversity within the church body and therefore desire to support and journey together as we relate with God and each other in some of the following environments:

- **Public (20+)**

In the Bible, we see Jesus seeking to make disciples as He engaged with larger numbers of people, e.g., His interaction with the crowds (Matthew 4:25; Luke 14:25), and the 72 (Luke 10:1-24).

At Emmanuel, we want to use each of our **larger gathered environments** as an opportunity to make disciples, e.g., **Sunday services, Friday Youth/Kids'** environments, **men's/women's** gatherings.

- **Social (10-15)**

Jesus demonstrated the necessity for **smaller accountable relationships** as an essential part of the life of a disciple. He did this by teaching and doing life with his twelve disciples (e.g., Matthew 10).

At Emmanuel, small accountable relationships are offered through:

Lifegroup 12s

These are **gatherings of 10-15 people** who meet bi-weekly in homes or around specific interests, e.g., crafts, football.

- **Personal (2-5)**

As well as having smaller accountable relationships amongst His twelve friends, Jesus also seemed to go to even deeper levels of trust with three in particular – Peter, James and John (Matthew 17; Mark 9). At Emmanuel, we seek to do this through:

Lifegroup 3s

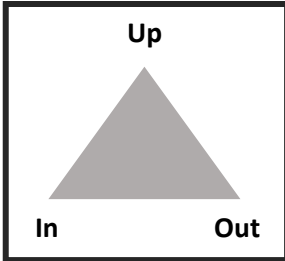
These are smaller **gatherings of 2-5 people** who are committed to transparent and accountable relationships in order to grow together in following Jesus. The aim for these groups is that after 1-2 years, each person in the group would be able to lead a smaller number of people themselves and replicate the process... **disciples making disciples!**

- **Intimate (1-1)**

Jesus regularly withdrew to spend time alone with the Father. This is the ultimate goal of discipleship, that each member of our church family would increasingly spend time alone with the Father and grow in devotion and desire to see the Kingdom come.

A TOOL TO USE

As stated previously, 1 John 2:6 makes it clear that for those of us who call ourselves disciples of Jesus, our goal should be to daily *walk in the ways of Jesus*, our Rabbi. As we examine the New Testament we see that Jesus lived His life based on three relationships: **Up** – with His Father; **In** – with His chosen followers; **Out** – with the hurting world around Him. This is illustrated in the following triangle:



Jesus *taught* and *modelled* out to His disciples how to live into each of these areas in life.

Up

Jesus frequently left the disciples to spend personal time with the Father (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16). He taught them the significance of prayer, and how to pray and communicate with the Father (Luke 11:1-13). When comparisons with one another or insecurities presented themselves, He spoke into it in love and challenged them into a greater depth of living (Mark 9:33-37; Matthew 18:1-5).

In

Jesus had significant relationships with others in which He intentionally invested (12s and 3s). When He went to engage with the Father He brought the three with Him (Matthew 17:1). He taught them and modelled out the significance of Sabbath and rhythms of rest (Mark 6:31). He demonstrated with His life the significance of generosity and sacrificial love for others (John 13:1-17).

Out

Jesus personally lived a life that engaged with the crowds and the broken world around Him. He healed the sick (Matthew 8:1-4), fed the poor (Mark 6:30-44), and cast out demons (Matthew 8:28-34). But with the people who were closest to Him, He challenged them to do the same (Mark 6:37), and when they took risks themselves He critiqued and gave honest feedback to call out more for them (Luke 10:17-20).

As we spend time alone or together in this devotional, we want to help and encourage you to engage in each of these ways – UP, IN, and OUT.

HOW TO USE THE BOOK

First

If you haven't already done so, please take a second to fill in your name on the inside of the front cover. There'll be a lot of identical books floating around, and we don't want yours to get lost.

Prepare

Get ready for each session by spending some time to invite the Holy Spirit to speak to you. The Bible is a written word (logos), which becomes a living word (rhema) as the Holy Spirit breathes upon it and speaks directly to our lives through it.

Commit

Commit to the journey. Discipleship is not a commitment to a moment, but to a lifetime journey. As you personally commit to journeying with God daily, commit to others by sharing what you are learning (possibly in Lifegroup 12s or 3s), and in this way encouraging one another in what God is saying.

Reflect & Respond

Each day, as you spend personal time with God, we encourage you to ask the following two questions:

- 1) What is God saying to me?
- 2) What am I going to do about it?

This is how we become doers and not just hearers of what God is saying.

INTRODUCTION TO EZRA

Ezra is the first part of a divided book, Nehemiah making up the second part. Although the Hebrew Bible treated these two books as one, they became separated due to Christian influence. The story will make better sense if you read the two books together.

There are three return trips that take place from exile in Babylon; they are outlined in Ezra 1-6, Ezra 7-10, and Nehemiah 1-7. The book of Ezra provides a much-needed link in the historical record of the Israelite people. When their king was dethroned and captured and the people exiled to Babylon, Judah as an independent nation ceased to exist. The book of Ezra provides an account of the Jews' regathering, their struggle to survive and rebuild what had been destroyed. Through his narrative, Ezra declares that they are still God's people and that God has not forgotten them.

Ezra focuses on several themes: the continuity of the leaders before and after the exile, the place of the community in bringing about God's work, the rebuilding of the altar and the temple, and the importance of holiness within the community. It is clear from this book that the freedom the Israelites have received is from God. We can take encouragement for our lives from this picture of a God who is faithful to His promises.

This wee book will inspire your prayer life and encourage your heart toward being fully given to God. So, grab your Bible, journal, pen, and a wee brew. Off we go again...

Love and prayers,
Phil

Read

Ezra 1

Live

In the first four verses, we read of a decree issued in 538 BC by the Persian king Cyrus declaring that the Jews who had been held captive in Babylon under the reign of Nebuchadnezzar were being sent home to rebuild their city and its temple (identified by Cyrus as *“the house of God”*). Several things jump out at us as we read this decree from the Persian king. The first is that Ezra refers to several prophecies from Jeremiah which foretold Israel’s exile and return to the land. Cyrus’ decree indicates that the seventy years of predicted exile are now thankfully over. God’s people will be set free and will be directed by a pagan king to return to the Promised Land in what amounts to a second Exodus. They will even be given the support necessary to rebuild.

A second detail to notice in the opening verses of Ezra is that unlike the Babylonians who plundered their defeated enemies and made captives of many of them, Cyrus sent tribal groups like the Israelites home so they might re-establish themselves in their homelands. In verses 5-11, we read of this prophesied release of the exiles from their captivity. The Jews return to their land along with much of the valuable treasure taken from them by Nebuchadnezzar, treasure now returned by Cyrus.

The third thing we should notice is that the book of Ezra is clear concerning the ultimate cause of this amazing turn of events: *“the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing.”* When we read in the Old Testament of God stirring up the Gentile nations to accomplish His purposes, it is usually in order to discipline His disobedient people. In this case, however, God stirs the heart of Cyrus to *restore* Israel – to allow the Jews to return home, rebuild their temple and their city. You just have to stand in awe of God and His absolute greatness to move in any heart He so desires.

Pray

Father, where there is excuse making, bring peace making. Where evil is lurking, bring the power of Jesus’ cross and crown. Where issues are complicated, bring the wisdom of the ages. Break strongholds of contempt with the strong grip of Your love. In Jesus’ strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

Their homeland was destroyed and they were forcibly removed to a strange land. There they were foreigners, losers, what society would class second-rate inhabitants. Feelings ran deep with anger, shame, alienation, and isolation. What hope could possibly exist in people who had not seen their homeland for over fifty years? This is where the book of Ezra starts. Have you ever had an experience of being physically or emotionally far from home? How would you describe that experience of exile? How might God be calling you to return to a place or a group? How can the profound gratitude of the Israelites, expressed in verses 68-69, impact your response to God?

It's probable that something is going to preoccupy us as this day begins. It could be things and people that irritate us, circumstances and stories that overwhelm us, disappointments and failures that anger us, or mirages and fantasies that deceive us. But, in response to this encouraging chapter, let's choose to lock our gaze on God's great love for us. The sheer bulk of His love for us in Jesus is staggering. According to God's own Word, He hasn't been discrete, measured or careful with His love. Rather, He has been lavish, over-the-top, immoderate, and extreme! Everything we want and more than we can imagine is found in the riches of God's love. By His love, He has adopted us as His beloved children. Right now, in this very moment, we have all the legal rights and personal delights that come with being God's child. Not a hair can fall from our head, not a breath can be taken from our lungs, and not a day can be snatched from our life apart from His Fatherly sovereignty. No hardship will come our way which hasn't first come before His occupied throne of grace. No pleasure will decorate our day that doesn't find its origin in Him. What lavish love we have in our Abba. Beautiful indeed!

Pray

Father, one day You will make me as lovely and as loving as Jesus. The rest of my momentary, broken, selfish, yearning, and longing life is nothing compared to an eternity of being with, and being like, Jesus. I forsake my whining for Your worship. Father, by this blessed hope, I will give praise to Your glory today. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

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RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

Let's begin with some thought provoking questions. If you had to go on a journey next month, what would be on your to do list? Who would you want to spend time with before you go? People from work? Those in your neighbourhood or social circles? You may find that it's the people you worship with each Sunday who are most important.

Once you arrive in the new place, what would be your priorities? In this chapter we learn about the Israelites' priorities. List yours as you think about establishing yourself in a new place. What stands out to you? How can the God-given priority of worshipping with God's people help you grow spiritually in your life? I love the encouragement in Hebrews 10:25, *"not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching."*

I love how the Jews made the building of the altar one of their first corporate and official acts. Altars represent a place to worship and turn hearts to God. I love how they did this even when they were unsure of their foreign neighbours (verse 3). Next to be built after the altar was the temple. This was to be built before the wall which was more of a military and political structure. These people were being led to put the Lord first in their actions.

I've never been more grateful for the family God has given me. We surely are a broken but beloved bunch, each of us on the path of groaning and growing in grace. Let's give thanks today for good friends with whom we can share longings and laughter, the bleakness and bounty of life. But in particular, let's be most thankful for the ways God shows us more of Himself, the Author and Perfecter of our faith. We can afford to be flexible about a lot of theological issues, but we can ill afford to be wrong about Him.

Pray

Father, You keep getting bigger and bigger, more and more liberating in my life. I want to boast more fully in Your righteousness and more humbly in my weaknesses. I want to finish my race knowing, loving, living, sharing and serving the gospel of Your grace. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

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RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

To show the continued opposition Israel faced, the author jumps ahead in time to tell about how their neighbours wrote to the king in order to damage Israel. I'm sure we have all said at one time or another, "It's like taking three steps forward and two steps back." That would be a great title for this chapter. God had stirred up the heart of the pagan king Cyrus to issue a decree for the Jews to return to their land and rebuild His temple ... one step forward! Fifty thousand Jews responded by giving up their lives in Babylon and making the long, dangerous trek back to the land ... two steps forward! They rebuilt the altar, gathered in Jerusalem, celebrated the Feast of Booths, and laid the foundation for the new temple ... three steps forward! Then the enemy hit and work on the temple stopped ... one step back. Unbelievably, for sixteen long years the work was put on hold ... two steps back. They were still in the land but there was no centre for worship in Jerusalem. The people, intimidated by their enemies, settled into a routine of life that moved along without temple worship. And then God stirred up the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, who we will read about in the next chapter. They got the rebuilding of the temple moving again.

New beginnings are exciting and filled with hope. Things don't have to be as they were during our time in captivity. By His abundant grace, we can turn back to the Lord and start afresh. But there are times when we have no sooner turned back than the enemy hits and we suffer a spiritual setback. The spiritual high we enjoyed is followed by a deep spiritual low. We're not sure if we want to ride the roller coaster back up only to face another sickening drop, so we settle into spiritual mediocrity. That's what happened here. The learning for us is that whenever you make a commitment to the Lord, be prepared to face the enemy's unrelenting attempt to set you back.

Pray

Father, I pray for those facing uncertain outcomes, difficult jobs, financial stress, parenting challenges and any number of hard situations. Grant me a centring inner joy – knowing the gospel is true, we are Your beloved children, and You are in complete control of all things. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

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RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

Imagine receiving a letter from the prime minister stating they want to help your Christian community fulfil its mission; just provide a list of your needs so they can send enough money. This was the joyful experience of the Israelites. When we have setbacks, we need to hear and cherish the voices that cry out, “Get on with God’s work!” God’s people need the voice of encouragement.

For a while, all was going great. Then, after running well, the faithful get tripped up. Samaritans want to join the rebuilding, but because they worship other gods, Zerubbabel and Jeshua refuse their offer. Following this rejection, the Samaritans set out to foil the work, and they accomplish their goal. For sixteen years the temple lies uncompleted. Those who had begun heroic accomplishments shift their focus from God’s house to their own needs.

Verse 1 tells us of the prophets who were on the scene. The people needed God’s Word. When you study the books of Haggai or Zechariah, keep the whole context of the Ezra story in mind. Haggai criticised them for putting all their attention on their own houses and leaving God’s house neglected. These prophets, men of God, urged the people to get on with God’s work, and they succeeded. In a new burst of energy, the people renewed their efforts to rebuild the temple with the leaders Zerubbabel and Jeshua.

It is a blessing when God’s people learn from their failures. Have you made a mistake? Have you given up, fallen down? Have you let your attention move from God’s work to your own interests? God’s Word challenged Israel in a time of need and there followed renewed commitment. We need encouragers like Haggai and Zechariah to inspire those who fall down. Maybe today you need their message of encouragement – get on with God’s work!

Pray

Father, You’re not into ‘saving face’ but saving me. When I ignore Your wooing or act immaturely in response to Your warnings, I simply reveal how little of the gospel I understand, for there’s nothing about You that justifies any response other than humility, gratitude, and submission. Fill my heart with Your grace and free my tongue for Your praise. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

REFLECT

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RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

The first half of this chapter recounts the official response from the Persian king, Darius, (Cyrus' successor) to a letter sent to the Persian royal court by the local governor, Tattenai, requesting a search of the state archives to see if the Jews were telling the truth in saying they had returned to the land upon the decree of Cyrus, and that he had decreed to fund the rebuilding of both the city and the temple.

The second half of the chapter describes how work on the temple, which came to a halt in 520 BC, got underway again. This second temple was finally completed in 516 BC during the sixth year of the reign of Darius. The completion of the rebuilt temple marks a major turning point not only in the book of Ezra, but also in the history of Israel. In the first six chapters, Ezra is recounting events which occurred nearly sixty years before his own return to Jerusalem in 458 BC. A rebuilt temple not only ties the Jews to Israel's previous history, it also opens a new future to the Jewish people. Ezra and Nehemiah will play a role in this.

I'd like to point out an important detail in verse 21. Only those who had separated themselves from *"the unclean practices of the nations"* were allowed to eat the Passover. A significant rule regarding the Passover was that it could not be celebrated by those who had not repented of sin. Even leaven, the symbol of sin, was not to be found in their households. Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of the Passover. It was because of our sin that Christ died, so when we turn to Him, we must turn away from our sin, walking in repentance. Isaiah the prophet wrote in Isaiah 59:2, *"your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God."* Since sin is what separates us from God, we have to be separated from our sin to be restored to God. This is why Mark points out that repentance is the beginning of the gospel (1:1-4).

Pray

Father, I am asking You to give to me a fresh infilling of Your Holy Spirit. I'm sorry that I seem to lose what You give so freely. My humanity and flesh war with Your constant infilling power so I need You to refill and refill and refill. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

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Live

We are now introduced to Ezra. Ezra came from a long line of priests, going all the way back to Aaron himself, the first high priest. We also read that Ezra was living among the exiles in Babylon and according to verse 6, he was “*a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses*”. Ezra had gained knowledge of the Word of God. In fact, rabbis considered him second only to Moses. Ezra was skilled in the Scriptures, which in his day referred to the Pentateuch. He was both called and equipped to serve as Israel's priest.

None of us really like change. Although I like newness, excitement and adventure, when all is said and done, I crave what is predictable, normal, and safe. May God give us the grace to accept change, because there's so much change going on everywhere we look. Our kids get older and our bodies get weaker. Styles change, worship changes, weather changes, but praise God there's one part of our lives that will never change, and that's the Lord. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. That doesn't make Him predictable, and certainly not manageable, but it does mean we can always count on Him.

The most fundamental change we need is to become like Jesus, and that process is the most disruptive and painful change we will ever go through. Yet, with the knowledge that one Day we'll be as lovely and as loving as Him, we gladly surrender to the work of the gospel in our lives. The better we know Jesus, the more we come alive to His promise to make all things new. Nothing catches Him off guard. The scary becomes the sacred when we're wearing the lens of the gospel. May God help each of us to see and accept change as part of a far better story than we could ever hope to write. That's what this chapter in Ezra is all about, the 'God story' in which we get the awesome privilege to play a part!

Pray

Father, because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, we're heading towards a place, family, and eternity in which it will all make sense and everything will be the way it's supposed to be. Hasten that magnificent Day! Until then, may I love You with passion, serve You without question, and order my life after Your eternal purposes. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

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RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

Imagine it's dark and you are in a part of town known to be dangerous; you and those with you have to travel on foot to your destination. Times like this naturally turn us to prayer. This was the situation Ezra found himself in, and the pressure was on because he had bragged that God would protect those who look to Him. Now he had to put his life where his mouth was. We typically turn to God in crisis and sometimes forget to rely on Him in daily life. Today's passage begs us to ask the big question, in what part of my life should I be looking to God for guidance?

Ezra led the second wave of exiles from Persia to Jerusalem. He came to Jerusalem with a letter from King Artaxerxes that granted him a huge amount of authority, including authorisation to tap into the royal treasury and permission to punish any Jew disobedient to the Law of Moses. In modern terms, Ezra might be called 'Secretary of State for Jewish Affairs'; he could have asked for nearly anything from the king of Persia. However, there was one thing Ezra did not ask for, a military escort to make the four-month journey to Jerusalem. The reason? Shame! Ezra had assured King Artaxerxes that the Almighty God would protect the travellers. I wonder if, later, realising the journey back to Jerusalem would be long and dangerous, Ezra thought, "It might be nice to have a Persian military escort!" What stopped Ezra from making this request was not timidity or fear of the king, but shame! He realised that it would be inconsistent to talk about God's protection and then ask for a military escort. Ashamed that earthly worries had overcome the faith he professed in God, Ezra commands a time of prayer and fasting. I love his bold proclamation in verse 23, *"So we fasted and petitioned our God about this and He answered our prayer."* You have just got to love this man's honesty and sincerity in seeking God. Our takeaway from this ought to be, bring it all to God!

Pray

Father, I love how You write stories of redemption for Your name's sake. The things that are impossible with us are more than possible with You. Keep me restless for my friends but fully resting in You. In Your strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

Today we see the people of God blindsided by their own sin. Even though God has been faithful, and even though He has done what the people have prayed for, some of them are unfaithful to Him. Sin always gets in the way of our being faithful to God. It also gets in the way of our seeing God's favour in our lives and in the life of the church. The truth is this, our response to sin determines our future. There are two responses. One is to repent. The other response is to be indifferent to the problem and continue to sin. Indifference is a person in complete rebellion against God as they continue to sin. This creates a downward spiral that gets worse as time goes by. Romans 1 shows a clear example of how continuing to sin makes a society worse.

Ezra chastised the people of Israel for intermarrying with foreign women. The problem was not that the women were foreign, but that they worshipped foreign gods. The influence of their religion would eliminate God's people. By intermarrying, the people of Israel were unfaithful to God and they knew the consequences. The humiliation of this sin causes Ezra to get up, tear his robe and tunic, and then fall to his knees, spread his hands and make a great confession. Ezra highlights the shame and embarrassment that their sin has caused.

The people of God realised that they had gravely sinned and that God had a right to punish them worse than He had. God had been gracious by allowing some to remain in their own land (though as slaves), and God had allowed them to rebuild the wall. These are all reminders of God's grace. I love Psalm 103:10, *"He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities."* And I love how the NLT puts Romans 5:20 *"God's law was given so that all people could see how sinful they were. But as people sinned more and more, God's wonderful grace became more abundant."*

Pray

Father, the greatest demonstration of Your sovereignty is the cross, and the greatest experience I can ever have is to fully trust in its finished work. I choose to lift my eyes to heaven today and fix my gaze on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of my faith. In Jesus' strong name. Amen.

REFLECT

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RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Live

The exiles who had returned a generation before Ezra merged with neighbouring cultures by marrying those who followed "*detestable practices*". This lack of faithfulness broke Ezra's heart and caused him to pray the prayer found in chapter 9. When the people saw his passionate praying on their behalf, they realised their need for change. Ezra attempted to start the wave of complete repentance. He was not putting on a show for the people around him, but rather falling before the Lord and asking for much needed mercy. A contrite heart draws others toward God; a self-centred heart deflects glory from God. Ezra did not wait for others to follow, but lived his life before the Lord. Others saw it for what it was and were moved.

Look at the two elements of repentance in verse two. First, there is an admission of guilt; and second, there is a call to hope, "God can renew us!" These two ideas are at the heart of our message to men and women walking in error. We do not explain away the error with excuses or lies, we define right and wrong by lining up with the commands of God. The only way to do this is to reach out to God. This is a path that leads through humble admission and a request for His undeserved favour.

Ezra didn't run ahead; he brought the people with him. He made sure their commitment was to God's Word, not simply to him. Because a godly leader does not ask people to follow them apart from God's Word, they can be bold in expecting obedience. Ezra expected the people to make an open promise to do right. Any mature leader can do no less. We cannot sanction wrong out of compassion, nor can we make people feel good about denying God's Word. I love how Ezra stepped in and stopped wrong by drawing a line in the sand, redefining the terms back to what God set. Our takeaway from this finale is: nothing gets fixed while God's standards are set aside or ignored.

Pray

Father, restore and renew my first love for You. Take my affections to new places of liberating and transforming wonder. I don't want to love You conventionally, politely, or with reservations. I want to love You with consuming abandon and joy, for You alone are worthy. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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