

LAMENTATIONS, EZRA & HAGGAI

(A total of 17 chapters)

If you have lost much – especially because of your own choices – you already understand the feelings expressed in these books. If you have had the opportunity to come back from personal disaster or failure, you will connect with the joy and discouragement of these events. If you have not had these experiences, these books are important because they can prepare you for trouble in the future.

For about 500 years kings from the Family of David had ruled. Some led toward God, but over and over, the kings turned to the false gods of their neighbors. This happened most often when the kings were strong and proud and when they married non-Jewish wives. Finally, God’s punishment came. When the Babylonians conquered in 586/587 B.C., there was a horrendous siege. Afterwards, many of the residents of the city and the surrounding area were force-marched across the wilderness to Babylon. Jerusalem was destroyed and the temple was flattened. The Exile was devastating. It was a turning point full of sorrow, repentance, renewed trust in God’s promises and renewed obedience to God’s law.

LAMENTATIONS

The book of Lamentations is five poems, beautiful expressions of sorrow and faith. The author lived through the siege and destruction of Jerusalem. Tradition tells us that the prophet Jeremiah wrote Lamentations. He was present for the destruction and was among those who remained behind. Each poem is an acrostic. Each verse begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet in alphabetical order.

Lamentations shows us how to cry out to God during the journey of grief to new life.

Grief: tell the story, cry out in pain
Assess: we were wrong, God is justified
Hope: great is your faithfulness
Acceptance:

Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored; renew our days as of old – unless you have utterly rejected us, and are angry with us beyond measure.
Lamentations 5:21-22

EZRA

The book of Ezra moves from grief over the losing Jerusalem to the joy of returning home and the struggle to rebuild both the temple and the community. In

Nehemiah, the narrative companion to Ezra, the focus is the successful, but very challenging, dual task of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem while contending with hostile neighbors.

Tips for reading Ezra:

- Use the character list provided below. The story is told plainly, but there are many characters in a few chapters.
- Chapter 2 is a list of people who return from Babylon. Do not worry about reading all the names.
- Note the ups and downs. Returning and rebuilding is joyful and discouraging. What makes it possible for the people to succeed?
- Strong measures are taken to prevent further sin and establish purity. I find expelling foreign wives and children to be very harsh, but I understand their determination to avoid the sins of the past. What does it take for you to put aside persistent sin?

HAGGAI

The prophets associated with return and rebuilding are Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Notice how his encouragement is based on God’s deeds in the past.

CHARACTERS

- Jeremiah – prophet before, during & after Jerusalem was destroyed. “Friends” took him to Egypt.
- King Cyrus – Persian emperor who ruled Babylonia 539-530 B.C. He ordered reconstruction of Jerusalem Temple and allowed exiles to return.
- Sheshbazzar – governor (prince of Judah) when Cyrus ordered rebuilding.
- Zerubbabel – led first group of returnees, became governor of Judah.
- Jeshua/Joshua – the high priest, colleague of Zerubbabel.
- King Ahasueres/Artaxerxes (Xerxes) – ruled 485-464 B.C., letters to and from him are in the middle of Ezra although he ruled empire after Darius; did he have regional responsibilities under his father? (Also married Esther)
- King Darius – ruled 522-488 B.C. He ordered temple to be completed when opponents tried to stop it. (Also released Daniel from lion’s den)
- Ezra – scribe/priest who led second group of returnees, appointed governor by King Artaxerxes.
- Haggai – prophet who prodded everyone to rebuild.
- Zechariah – a prophet who encouraged rebuilding.

