

# How to use Explore

## In this issue

The 92 daily readings in this issue of *Explore* are designed to help you understand and apply the Bible as you read it each day.

## It's serious!

We suggest that you allow 15 minutes each day to work through the Bible passage with the notes. It should be a meal, not a snack! Readings from other parts of the Bible can throw valuable light on the study passage. These cross-references can be skipped if you are already feeling full up, but will expand your grasp of the Bible. *Explore* uses the NIV2011 Bible translation, but you can also use it with the NIV1984 or ESV translations.

Sometimes a prayer box will encourage you to stop and pray through the lessons—but it is always important to allow time to pray for God's Spirit to bring his word to life, and to shape the way we think and live through it.

## We're serious!

All of us who work on *Explore* share a passion for getting the Bible into people's lives. We fiercely hold to the Bible as God's word—to honour and follow, not to explain away.

1

Find a time you can read the Bible each day

2

Find a place where you can be quiet and think

3

Ask God to help you understand

4

Carefully read through the Bible passage for today

5

Study the verses with *Explore*, taking time to think

6

Pray about what you have read

the goodbook  
COMPANY

Opening up the Bible

# Welcome

Tim Thornborough,  
Publishing Director  
at The Good Book  
Company, is passionate  
about helping people  
to open up the Bible



Welcome to *Explore*—a resource to help you dig into, understand and apply to your life the timeless truth of God’s word.

It can be a struggle to find a daily time to spend with God. Children, the busyness of life, special nights out, holidays, or just sheer exhaustion can all conspire to get in the way. However, there is no substitute for just getting into a good habit.

Whatever you choose to do, guard your time with God jealously. If you come hungry to learn from the Lord, and to feed on the truth, it will be a place of nurture and growth, and a source of direction and strength for your daily life.

☛ *Time:* Find a time when you will not be disturbed, and when the cobwebs are cleared from your mind. Many people have found that the morning is the best time, as it sets you up for the day. You may not be a “morning person”, so last thing at night or a mid-morning break may suit you. Whatever works for you is right for you.

☛ *Place:* Jesus says that we are not to make a great show of our religion (see *Matthew 6 v 5-6*), but rather, pray with the door to our room shut. So, anywhere you can be quiet and private is the key. Some people plan to get to work a few minutes earlier and get their Bible out in an office, or some other quiet corner.

☛ *Prayer:* Although *Explore* helps with specific prayer ideas from the passage, you

should try to develop your own lists to pray through. Use the flap inside the back cover to help with this. Often our problem is not so much who to pray for, as what to pray for them! That’s why Bible reading and prayer are inseparable. We are reminded from God’s word of what is truly important; it will shape what we pray for ourselves, the world and others.

☛ *Share:* As the saying goes: expression deepens impression. So try to cultivate the habit of sharing with others what you have learned. It will encourage both them and you. Using the same notes as a friend will help you encourage each other to keep going.

## Remember:

*It’s quality, not quantity, that counts:* Better to think briefly about a single verse, than to skim through pages without absorbing anything.

*Falling behind:* It’s inevitable that you will occasionally miss a day. Don’t be paralysed by guilt. Just start again.

*It’s about developing a love relationship, not a law relationship:* Don’t think that “doing your quiet time” is an end in itself. The sign that your daily time with God is real is when you start to love him more and serve him more wholeheartedly.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tim' with a flourish.

# EZRA: Faithful God

The book of Ezra continues where 2 Chronicles left off. So today we've got a little prequel which will help us to get to grips with the big question Ezra is asking.

## The last king

### Read 2 Chronicles 36 v 11-16

After 500 years of the monarchy, stretching back to Saul, Zedekiah will be the last king.

- ❓ *What does Zedekiah's behaviour reveal about his attitude towards God (v 12-13)?*
- ❓ *How do the people demonstrate the same attitude (v 14, 16)?*
- ❓ *How does God initially respond (v 15)? What is his final response (v 16)?*

It's a catalogue of the worst sins the people have committed over the years. An evil, arrogant king who thinks he's above God, leading an idolatrous, scoffing people who throw God's kindness back in his face. The consequences are inevitable...

## The last of the people?

### Read 2 Chronicles 36 v 17-21

- ❓ *What happens to the people (v 17, 20)?*
- ❓ *What happens to Jerusalem (v 18-19)?*

Many of God's people are dead; the rest are captives in Babylon. The temple is gone, and Jerusalem lies in ruins. It's a pitiful end for the once-great nation—but they deserve it.

- ❓ *What hope is there (v 21)?*

### TIME OUT

#### Read Jeremiah 29 v 10-14

- ❓ *What does God promise to do?*
- ❓ *He also promises that his people will be changed by their 70-year exile. How?*

## The big question

### Read Ezra 9 v 9

- ❓ *What is the big question which this verse answers?*

Here we see an undoing of the events of 2 Chronicles 36 v 19-20: the temple rebuilt, Jerusalem secure, and the people restored. Although they're subject to the Persians, the Persian kings have shown them remarkable favour. Will God stay faithful to his covenant promises in spite of his people's horrendous unfaithfulness? The answer is a resounding "yes". We'll spend the next couple of weeks finding out how he does it.

## Apply

- ❓ *What have today's passages taught you about God's character?*

## Pray

Give thanks for God's unfailing faithfulness to you. Pray that he would use the book of Ezra to further deepen your faith.

# How long, O Lord?

*God's people are in a mess, and the nations are laughing at them. How should we react when we are shamed and held in derision?*

## Read Psalm 79

### A cry among the ruins

It's a bleak picture. Foreign invaders desecrate holy places; bodies lie unburied among the rubble. We've seen pictures like this on the news, and we cry out against the invaders, and for governments to do something about the carnage. But as the psalmist weeps over Jerusalem, he does not blame governments or the evil invading armies.

- ❓ *Who is responsible (v 5)?*
- ❓ *What reason for God's anger is given in v 8?*

Sometimes, God brings us to difficult situations to discipline us. Perhaps because we are proud or disobedient. Perhaps because of our ingratitude or grumbling. We may not think we need it, but he knows we do.

## ▼ Apply

- ❓ *Can you think of times when you have needed such discipline?*
- ❓ *Can you see what God taught you at such times?*
- ❓ *Are there particular sins you need to confess before God now?*

Thank God that he loves you enough to discipline you.

## Why God disciplines us

The surrounding nations mistake discipline for desertion (v 10). Instead of recognising that God is disciplining his people because he loves them, they assume God has deserted them because he despairs of them.

But they will see things differently when God delivers his people; then it won't be "Where is their God?", but, "There is their God!"

- ❓ *How is God's glory displayed when he delivers his people (v 9)?*

And, of course, God will inevitably restore his people.

- ❓ *Why will he restore us (v 9-10)?*
- ❓ *What will happen when he does (v 13)?*
- ❓ *How would you now answer the haunting questions of v 5?*

## TIME OUT

### Read Proverbs 3 v 11-12

- ❓ *Why should we not despise the Lord's discipline?*
- ❓ *What does the way we receive discipline show about our relationship with the Lord?*



# The wait is over!

*Ezra himself doesn't appear until chapter 7. The action starts 80 years earlier, just after the Babylonian empire has been conquered by the Persians.*

## The heart of the king

We've already heard the events of Ezra prophesied by Jeremiah. But there's an earlier and even more specific prophecy.

### Read Isaiah 44 v 24-28

- ❓ *How does v 24-26a remind us that God is more than capable of orchestrating historical events?*
- ❓ *We're not told who exactly Cyrus is, but what is he going to do (v 28)? Why?*

### Read Ezra 1 v 1-3

- ❓ *How is Isaiah's prophecy fulfilled?*
- ❓ *What is Cyrus' understanding of what's going on?*

Cyrus might have thought he could appease his subjects and their gods by treating them generously. But how do we know that God is really the one in control (v 1)?

## The Lord provides

### Read Ezra 1 v 4-11

- ❓ *What are we told about the returnees (v 5)?*

Most of the 12 tribes had been lost, swallowed up by the Assyrians in the 7th century. Only Judah, Benjamin and Levi remained, because they had stayed loyal to the Davidic kings. And not all of them returned, only those whom God called.

- ❓ *Where do the materials come from (v 4, 6)? Does this remind you of anything? (Hint: Exodus 12 v 35-36.)*
- ❓ *How does God provide for his people in Ezra 1 v 7-11?*

These items were used by the priests when making sacrifices. Imagine how much more difficult it would have been to restart temple worship if they'd had to make everything from scratch!

## Apply

Isn't it exciting? God has opened every door, and the exiles are poised, ready to return to the promised land at last!

- ❓ *What doors is God opening for you today? What opportunities is he giving you to trust and obey him? Will you go through, or stay behind?*

BABYLONIANS				PERSIANS											
Nebuchadnezzar 604-562 BC		Belshazzar 550-539 BC		Cyrus 539-530 BC		Darius 522-486 BC		Xerxes 485-465 BC		Artaxerxes 465-424 BC					
<b>604 BC</b>	Daniel and others taken into exile in Babylon	<b>586 BC</b>	Jerusalem falls to the Babylonians, more Jews taken into exile	<b>538 BC</b>	Cyrus permits exiles to return	<b>536 BC</b>	temple rebuilding begins	<b>515 BC</b>	Temple in Jerusalem completed	<b>480 BC</b>	events in <b>Esther</b>	<b>458 BC</b>	Ezra and some more exiles return	<b>445 BC</b>	<b>Nehemiah</b> begins wall construction

# Priority check

*Don't be tempted to skip this chapter; it gives us a vital glimpse into the mindset of the returning exiles.*

## Who's who

### Read Ezra 2 v 1-2a

- ❓ *Given the 70 years in exile, why is this list of names important? What does it prove?*
- ❓ *How is it decided where everyone should settle?*

The passage of time doesn't seem to have dimmed the Israelites' memories. They've kept a close record of who's related to whom, and know the exact locations of their ancestral homes. This matters because God's promises of blessing to Abraham were bound up with this specific people and this specific land (see Genesis 12 v 1-3). After a hiatus of 70 years, these promises are swinging into action once more.

#### TIME OUT

Zerubbabel (Ezra 2 v 2a) is the leader of the exiles, and a descendant of the penultimate king of Judah: Jehoiachin (also known as Jechoniah). Matthew's Gospel starts off with another list of names: the generations from Abraham to Jesus.

- ❓ *What do you notice in Matthew 1 v 12?*
- ❓ *How does this underline the importance of the events of Ezra?*

### Scan-read Ezra 2 v 2b-58

This long list is sub-divided into categories.

In v 3-20, people are listed by families; then in v 21-35, the rest are listed by place of origin.

- ❓ *What are the remaining categories v 36, 40, 41, 42, 43, 55?*

All of these roles, whether they involved leading the nation in sacrifices and worship, or simple menial tasks, were essential to the smooth functioning of Jewish religious life.

- ❓ *What does their inclusion tell us about the priorities of the returning exiles?*

## Excluded?

### Read Ezra 2 v 59-70

- ❓ *What's the problem in v 59-63? What's the temporary solution?*

It sounds harsh, but if someone couldn't prove their heritage, then they posed a threat to the spiritual purity of Israel. One of the main reasons for the exile was that the Jews had allowed themselves to be led astray into pagan idol-worship—they couldn't take any chances this time around! However, even idolators could convert to Judaism if they wished, as we'll see in Ezra 6 v 21.

## Apply

- ❓ *What are your priorities?*
- ❓ *What do they reveal about your spiritual health?*
- ❓ *Are you seeking a nice comfortable life, or pursuing godliness at all costs?*

# Security in the Lord

*What makes you feel secure? For the exiles, it could easily be their reclaimed homes. But before they get too comfortable, they're on the move again.*

## God first

### Read Ezra 3 v 1-3

- ❓ *Why would this mass gathering in Jerusalem be a spiritual shot in the arm for the Israelites?*
- ❓ *Jerusalem is in ruins—they're faced with a massive building project. But where do they start? Does this surprise you?*

They're surrounded by dangerous adversaries, but rather than prioritising walls and gates, they start with the altar. They know that true safety lies not in outward fortifications, but in being right with God.

### Read Exodus 29 v 38-43

- ❓ *What did Moses command the Israelites to do? What was the purpose (v 42-43)?*

These daily sacrifices were an ongoing reminder of the price to be paid if a holy God is to dwell with a sinful people. The exiles have begun well, sorting out their relationship with God at the earliest opportunity.

## Pray

Is there anything you need to sort out in your relationship with God right now? Come to him in repentance, knowing that Jesus' sacrifice provides true safety.

## A lesson from the past

### Read Ezra 3 v 4-6 and Leviticus 23 v 39-43

- ❓ *What does the Festival of Tabernacles (or "booths") involve (Leviticus 23 v 39-42)?*
- ❓ *What event is being commemorated (Leviticus 23 v 43)?*
- ❓ *How would celebrating this festival have challenged the recently returned exiles?*

After their rescue from Egypt, the Israelites had no permanent homes for 40 years. This forced them to rely on God to provide their most basic needs: branches for shelter, food and water to sustain them, and safety from their enemies. The exiles could easily fall into self-reliance, now that they have their own land and homes again. But the Festival of Tabernacles draws them right back to God, to depending on his mercy instead of trusting the false security offered by the world.

## Apply

There are so many things which promise security: sturdy homes, well-stocked supermarkets, paycheques, insurance policies, friends and family—you'll have your own list. But though they might seem solid, all of these things are fragile, fallible, and temporary; it's the height of foolishness to rely on them. Jesus is the only one who will never let us down, because he is "the same yesterday and today and for ever" (Hebrews 13 v 8).

- ❓ *How does this challenge you today?*