



Note: For those using the included PowerPoint presentation, the manuscript progression to each slide is denoted with [Slide #].

[Slide 1] [Leader tip: come up with your own video game story to open the series; the point being to set the stage for the ‘game over’ moment when a video game asks if you want to ‘continue.’]

Let’s talk about the eighties. Back in the eighties, when I was in middle school, video games reigned supreme. My best friend and I used to ride our bikes to the arcades and check out all the games. And if we were lucky, we had some quarters to spend. My favorite arcade was this one place that charged a couple bucks to get in ... but then all the games were only a nickel to play. This was critical because it’s not like playing Halo on your Xbox, you don’t get to just keep respawning in an arcade.

[Slide 2 & 3] My favorite game was Gauntlet. It is amazing. I always chose Valkyrie because she was the best mix of power, magic, and speed. The game goes on forever. But here’s the catch, even if you’re not getting hurt, your life meter slowly ticks down. It is impossible to beat the game on one quarter. Inevitably, my character would die, and the screen would prompt me with that question of all questions, “Continue?” And a ten second timer would start counting down to when I would lose the opportunity to pick up where I left off. So, I loved the nickel arcade because I would jam way too many nickels in my pocket and play Gauntlet until my eyes were bloodshot and my hands were cramping up. It was one ‘continue’ after another.

[Slide 4] I think of this when I started reading the book of Ezra, which we’re going to be looking at for the next few weeks. The book was written by Ezra, a priest, around 440 BC, or 2460ish years ago, give or take a day.<sup>1</sup> Let me set the stage a little bit: 1-2 Chronicles fills us in on the backstory. The Israelites had broken their promise to God over and over, to the point that they had stopped following God and had started building worship sites to other idols and false gods. It was bad. So, God did what He promised He would do if they did that:

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<sup>1</sup> *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 2101.

[Slide 5] *1 Chronicles 9:1b (NLT) The people of Judah were exiled to Babylon because they were unfaithful to the Lord.*

The Babylonians conquered the Israelites, but they didn't just conquer them, they tried to destroy their identity. They destroyed the temple and they took Israel's best young people to their capital. Do you remember the stories of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego? They were part of this resettlement. And they scattered the rest of the people. It was bad.

And then fiftyish years later, the Persians conquered the Babylonians, and they had a different approach to conquering people. They basically said, "Hey, you belong to us now, but as long as you behave and give us tributes, we'll let you do your thing." In fact, Cyrus, the king of Persia, made a decree that the Jewish exiles could return to Jerusalem and rebuild the destroyed temple. He even returned 5400 articles of gold and silver that the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, had taken from the temple before destroying it.<sup>2</sup>

[Slide 6] It's almost like it had been **GAME OVER** for the Israelites and then God popped up the question,

[Slide 7] **CONTINUE?** Do you want to continue? Do you want to begin again, pick up where you left off, and do better this time?

Here's the thing: it would have been easy to say no. It had been more than fifty years since they had been uprooted from their homes and forced to move by the Babylonians. They had learned new languages, they had built homes, raised families, had friends and acquaintances. Imagine how hard it would be for you to move now, to leave your friends, to leave everything you know and go to a place that your ancestors lived, but you don't know about. And at least we have cell phones and social media to stay in contact. Back then, once they moved, they said goodbye forever. To return would have meant leaving homes and jobs and towns where things were stable to start over, to rebuild. And who knew? If they went back, it might not go well, they might fail, they might lose everything. It took a lot to make the decision to return to Israel and continue with God.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 2102.



- What do you think it was like for the Israelites to go back to Jerusalem? What struggles would they have had? What hopes would they have had?
- Would you have stayed in Babylon where your life was established, or would you have made the journey to Jerusalem? Explain your answer.
- What does it mean to “continue to believe”? What kinds of circumstances can make it difficult?
- Has there been a time when you decided to continue to believe? What happened? What has helped you continue to believe?
- Why is it important to continue to stand? What kinds of things can cause you to drift?
- How can we help each other stand?
- Read John 20:31. What does it mean to have “life by the power of his name”?
- Read Philippians 1:6. Why is it important that God will continue no matter what?