

A LOOK AT A BOOK: EZRA

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“There was a time when American evangelicals prized and cultivated biblically chaste Christian thought and an incisive analysis of the culture from a perspective apart from it. But the last few decades have seen an erosion of the old distinctions, a gradual descent into the ‘self’ movement, a psychologizing of the faith, and an adaptation of Christian belief to a therapeutic culture... We now blithely speak of marketing the gospel like any other commodity, oblivious to the fact that such rhetoric betrays a vast intrusion of worldliness into the church.” (David Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams*)

Christians have surrendered our green cards and taken up full citizenship in the world. We are done with this “just passing through” stuff! Instead, we have settled down, bought homes, opened IRAs, and dug in for the long run.

There are countless problems with this situation. For one, let’s just admit the world does worldliness better than the church does, no matter how hard we try. If we want to please the world by being like the world, we lose. Why do people keep publishing stories about declining church numbers as if this is a surprise?

From 1989 to 1998, our nation’s population grew substantially, but the absolute numbers of Lutherans fell by 2 percent, Episcopalians by 5 percent, Methodists by 7 percent, Presbyterians by almost 12 percent, and Congregationalists by almost 15 percent. In our own day, there is no doubt that the mission of the church needs to be renewed!

INTRODUCING EZRA

Ezra is a comparatively short book. It is only ten chapters long and can be read in less than an hour.

Originally, in the Hebrew canon, Ezra was combined with Nehemiah as one book. They were divided in the Christian Bible around the end of the fourth century A.D. because of the main characters who carry the story line in each. Together, the two books cover about one century of history – from 539 to 433 B.C. The book of Ezra describes a first wave of exiles who return to Judah under King Zerubbabel to rebuild the temple in the years 539-516 B.C., as well as a second wave who return with Ezra more than fifty years later (around 458). Nehemiah, whom we will look

at in our next study, rebuilds the walls a little more than ten years later (445-433 B.C.).

Let's quickly walk through the book of Ezra in order to familiarize ourselves with it. Remember, the people of Judah were exiled in 586 B.C. when the Babylonian empire crushed Jerusalem. The Babylonians literally tore down the walls and carried tens of thousands of Jews away to Babylon. About fifty years then pass, during which time the Babylonian empire actually crumbles, almost from within, and the Persian Empire eats it up. Daniel would still be alive at this time, though he appears to have died shortly after the end of the exile. At the opening of Ezra, Cyrus is the great king over Persia, and among his subjects are the captives from Israel. In the first few verses, we read the decree Cyrus issued in 539 B.C. that released the exiles to return to Judah.

Chapters 1-2 go on to describe the first exiles who return and some of the goods they bring back with them for rebuilding the temple.

Chapters 3-6 then describe the rebuilding of the temple. At the beginning of chapter 3, the altar is rebuilt and the people start offering sacrifices again. The foundation of the temple itself is then laid. In verses 1-5 of chapter 4, some opposition to this work arises, and the work ceases. We don't know exactly how long it stopped, but probably for about fifteen years. Then in chapter 5, the two prophets Haggai and Zechariah begin to preach and the people start rebuilding again. This occurs sometime around 520 B.C. Also, Tattenai, the governor over the geographic region that included Judah, sends a letter to the emperor Darius, asking if the Jews had indeed received permission to rebuild their temple. In chapter 6 Darius writes back, confirming that they have his permission. The temple is then completed and celebrations are held. This occurs around 516 B.C.

And that's the first six chapters of Ezra.

About a fifty-year break follows, which is when we think the events described in the book of Esther took place. Picking up again in chapter 7, the Persian emperor Artaxerxes, who reigned in the middle of the fifth century B.C., issues a decree sending Ezra the priest back to Jerusalem. Chapter 8 lists some of the people who return with Ezra. In chapters 9-10, Ezra discovers that the Jews have already begun to intermarry with the idolatrous people of the land, and he mourns over their sin. He then leads the people in repentance.

The latest event in the book of Ezra, chronologically, appears to be in chapter 4. After talking about the opposition to rebuilding the temple in the first five verses of chapter 4, the author of Ezra decided to insert two letters that would be written many years later, one to and one from Emperor Artaxerxes, regarding the opposition to rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem. Perhaps these later letters were inserted simply to show that the sort of opposition that begins over the temple would continue for years to come.

That's a quick walk-through of the book.

The Return

In the first two chapters is the return itself, as decreed by Emperor Cyrus himself. (Read 1:1-7)

An inventory of the returned articles is then provided in the remainder of chapter 1, followed in chapter 2 by a list of the families who returned. Then toward the conclusion of chapter 2 we read, "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. According to their ability they gave to the treasury...." (2:68-69).

The Restoration of the Sacrifices

So the decree has gone out. The people have packed up and left. They have arrived at home. The work has begun. And then, at the beginning of chapter 3, a second great thing happens. They restore the sacrifices. (Read 3:1-3)

The Rebuilding of the Temple

Having begun the sacrifices, the people were ready to rebuild the temple itself, which takes up the rest of chapter 3.

Foundation. They begin by laying the foundation. (Read 3:8-11a)

Opposition. But this happy picture is soon spoiled by opposition. At the beginning of chapter 3, we learn that the returned exiles were, in fact, proceeding in their program of building the altar "despite their fear of the peoples around them" (3:3). Why did they fear the surrounding peoples? Because these people, called "enemies" at the beginning of chapter 4, were "interested" in the returning Israelites and even offered to "help" (see 4:1-2). There had been a long history of antagonism between the Jews and the people of the land – even the ones who had half-adopted Jewish practices – and they knew their enemies did not really want to

help. They wanted to discourage the Jews and make them afraid. In fact, they even managed to successfully frustrate the Jews' building efforts for a number of years. (Read 4:4-5)

Verse 24 seems to pick up where verse 5 leaves off, back in the 530s when the building of the temple was frustrated by these counselors. In the second year of Darius, we learn, the work of rebuilding the temple resumes. Notice the word "until" in verse 24: "Thus the work on the house of God in Jerusalem came to a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia" (4:24). The opposition to the Jews was a serious thing, and it is given prominence in the book of Ezra.

Completion. But as we continue through Ezra, we find that the opposition against the Jews was not finally successful. The temple was brought to completion! (Read 6:13-22).

So the temple is completed, which may be the most important event in this book. A great celebration ensues, followed by a joyful celebration of the Passover.

God's sovereign hand. Now, if the opposition against the Jews is so serious – the opposition that began with the exile and continued through these events in Ezra – how are they able to successfully rebuild the temple? The short answer is, because God's hand sovereignly moves. Reading through this book, we see clearly that God changes hearts and attitudes. In the very first verse, the Lord acts sovereignly in the life of the Persian king Cyrus: "The Lord moved the heart of Cyrus" (1:1). And God moves not just in Cyrus's heart. He moves in the hearts of all the Jews who return to resettle in Jerusalem – "everyone whose heart God had moved" (1:5). Later in the book, God changes the attitude of the king of Assyria (6:22). And later still, he puts it into the heart of King Artaxerxes to bring honor to the house of Yahweh (6:27-28). Indeed, both Cyrus and Artaxerxes, these foreign kings, explicitly recognize God's sovereignty (1:2; 7:23)! Also, we are told that one campaign of opposition to the Jews was unsuccessful because God's eye watched over the elders and builders (5:5).

Throughout the book of Ezra, we find a reoccurring phrase about God's gracious hand being on the ones he intends to protect. In chapter 7, God's gracious hand is on Ezra (7:9). In chapter 8, God's gracious hand is on the party preparing to return to Jerusalem (8:18). Ezra also tells King Artaxerxes that the gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him" (8:22). Then, after Ezra and his entourage

safely in Jerusalem after a four-month journey, Ezra writes that “the hand of our God was on us, and he protected us from enemies and bandits along the way.”

GOD’S WORD REVEALS (CHAPTERS 7-9)

We also see in the book of Ezra that God’s Word reveals. We learn in chapters 7-9, in particular, that God’s Word reveals the sins of his people.

The Word Restored to the People

As we said earlier, a time gap of more than fifty years separates chapters 6 and 7. Beginning in chapter 7, Ezra is sent to restore God’s Word to God’s people in Judea. That is what chapters 7-8 are about in particular. When the story picks up, Ezra is still in exile with a number of other Jews. (Read chapter 7)

At the beginning of chapter 8, a list of these leading men followers, as well as some of the preparatory stops Ezra took to organize their return journey. Particularly striking is how he prepared himself and the returning exiles by casting themselves into the Lord’s hands. (Read 8:21-33)

Then, several verses later, we read about their arrival in Jerusalem. (Read 8:31-36)

So, who would bring God’s Word to God’s people? The man God had clearly prepared to begin it: Ezra. You can see Ezra’s resume in the first verses of chapter 7. His lineage goes back to Aaron (7:5), and he is called “a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses” (7:6). In his letter, King Artaxerxes refers to Ezra as “the priest a teacher of the Law of the God of heaven” and as one who possesses “wisdom” (7:21, 25).

Ezra had devoted himself to (1) studying the Word of God, (2) doing the Word of God, and (3) teaching the Word of God. His mission was to go and teach in Judah and Jerusalem “the commands and decrees of the Lord” (Ezra 7:11; cf. 7:12, 14; 9:10-11). God sovereignly brought Ezra – through the edict of Artaxerxes – to Jerusalem to teach his Word.

As a brief side note, you may be surprised to read that Emperor Artaxerxes of Persia promoted Ezra’s teaching back in Jerusalem. Artaxerxes was not Jewish. Why did he care what the Jews were taught, and why would he want Ezra to go and teach? Well, that should not surprise us too much. Many of the world’s empires who inhabitants have espoused different religions have instituted policies – wisely – allowing for the tolerance of religious diversity. There is nothing new about this idea. In fact, our own nation is far less religiously diverse than many

nations in the world throughout history, especially when compared to empires of Persia's size. Respecting the religious beliefs of others – even the beliefs that you know are wrong – is a necessary part of coexisting and even prospering in a society with people different from us. In Ezra's day, God used such tolerance to accomplish his own purposes for his people. Surely he can use the liberties we enjoy in this country no less.

Notice, then, how powerful God's Word proves to be in the book of Ezra. In chapter 4, for instance, the opposition manages to stymie the rebuilding of the temple. What got it started again? Was it Darius's letter in chapter 6? Well, his letter gave the Jews permission to proceed with building. But what started the whole process was the preaching of God's Word by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah in chapter 5 (5:1-2; 6:14). Their preaching met the opposition, defeated the discouragement of God's people, and restarted everything! In chapter 9, when the sin of God's people is exposed, they respond with grief. A number of the people are described as those who "trembled at the words of the God of Israel" (9:4).

The Word Exposing the Sins of the People

What was the effect of God's Word when it was clearly taught once again in Jerusalem? It exposed the sin of the people. Let's look at what happens in chapter 9, after Ezra's arrival in Jerusalem. (Read 9:1-15)

What we find here in chapter 9 is what we can see through Ezra: an example of the sinfulness of these people, and a clear testimony of why they had been exiled in the first place. Back in chapter 4, two characters in the Persian government, Rehum and Shimshai, sent a letter to Artaxerxes, warning of the danger of letting the Jews rebuild Jerusalem's walls since the city had a history of rebellion and wickedness (4:12). Ironically, they spoke better than they knew; they didn't know the half of it! And in chapter 5, the Jewish elders themselves gave an interesting summary of their people's history: "Because our fathers angered the God of heaven, he handed them over to Nebuchadnezzar the Chaldean, king of Babylon, who destroyed this temple and deported the people to Babylon" (5:12).

All this history is summarized in one sentence toward the beginning of Ezra's prayer in chapter 9. Did you notice it? He prayed, "From the days of our forefathers until now, our guilt has been great. Because of our sins, we and our kings and our priests have been subjected to the sword and captivity, to pillage and humiliation at the hand of foreign kings, as it is today" (9:7).

So what is the great sin exposed by God's Word here in chapter 9? Ezra states the answer explicitly: "we have disregarded the commands you gave" (9:10-11). Which commands? "Do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons or take their daughters for your sons" (9:12). The people of Israel had received this command a number of times. Moses, for instance, had instructed them in Deuteronomy, "Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the Lord's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you" (Deuteronomy 7:3-4). Yet the people of Israel, once again, had not kept themselves separate. No sooner had they returned to the Promised Land than they began mixing themselves with the non-Israelites who loved, worshiped, and served other gods. And in thus failing to keep themselves separate, they were unfaithful to God.

Some people misunderstand what God was referring to as sin in passages like these. He was in no way calling interracial marriage sin. God has always wanted his people – including his post-exile people – to be preserved from idolatry, from spiritual adultery, from cheating on God, so that they will persevere in faithfulness to God. So he says to them, "Don't marry people who don't worship me!" Now, clear allowances were made in Deuteronomy for those non-Israelites who wished to join Israel, like Ruth, who decided to accept the God of Israel as her God. But that is a different matter. A situation like Ruth's does not introduce the problem of having one marriage and two gods.

Yet standing there, freshly returned from exile and beholding the sin around him, Ezra knew what his Bible taught well enough to observe, "You have punished us less than our sins have deserved" (9:13). God had warned his people over and over that if they would not separate from the idolatrous nations around them, then he would disperse them into the nations. After all, what's the purpose of having a non-special special people? A non-separate separate people? If God's people are intent on living just like the world, then they should not be called God's special people! They are a sham. So disperse them; dismiss them back into the world.

It is the function of God's Word to call God's people to separate themselves from sin, and that is why God sent Ezra. It is also why Zerubbabel, in chapter 4, discouraged non-Israelites from helping the Israelites rebuild the temple (4:3). Faithfulness to the Word of God meant keeping separate.

Today, we are not called to geographically *separate* ourselves from the nations. But we are called to live *distinct* lives for the very same reasons the Jews were called to separate themselves in their land.

GOD’S PEOPLE REPENT (CHAPTER 10)

Now we come to the last chapter in Ezra, where we find that God’s people repent. Let’s look at chapter 10. (Read 10:1-17)

Following this passage, the final verses of the book are a list of all the descendants of priests who had married foreign wives (10:18-44). But what a vivid passage these first seventeen verses are! The whole assembly responds with a loud voice in the pouring rain. Most significantly, though, was their response to the exposure of their sin.

Confession and Sorry for Sin

When their sin is exposed, they express sorrow for their sin and they confess it.

Back in chapter 9, we saw that Ezra was appalled and astonished. As one scholar has observed, “Our greatest security against sin is to be shocked by it.” (Edward Musgrave Blaiklock, in a sermon titled “Temptation,” at the Keswick Convention, 1959). And the depth of Ezra’s shock and sorrow is clear. He abases himself (9:5), and then the sorrow in his heart wells up and compels his lips to prayer: “O my God, I am too ashamed and disgraced to lift up my face to you, my God, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens” (9:6).

Anyway, Ezra’s sorrow for sin spreads in chapter 10. In verse 1, a large crowd gathers around Ezra and joins him in weeping bitterly. In verse 2, one member of the crowd leads in a public confession of sin. Then Ezra calls “all the men of Judah and Benjamin” to “make confession to the Lord” (10:9, 11). And they do! The whole assembly responds with a loud voice, “we have sinned greatly” (10:13). God led Ezra and the people into sorrow for their sin and a confession of it. Again, the light of Scripture exposes sin.

Practice consistently confessing your sins to God. You won’t surprise God when you acknowledge what he knows anyway. But you will instruct yourself, and, by God’s grace, you will humble yourself.

Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 387-408.

