

GOD WITH US

Part 7: Kings & Prophets to Exile and Return *Judah's Fall and God's Faithfulness*

Message 13 – The 1st and 2nd Returns from Captivity Ezra

Introduction

Among the captives in Persia was Ezra the scribe. He was from a high-priestly lineage extending back to Aaron, the first high priest and brother of Moses. But in his historical setting, Ezra's role as a *scribe and teacher* of the Law of God was most significant. ***"He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given" (7:6).*** Ezra's main contribution was to revive the people's interest in the scriptures and call them back to genuine worship of Yahweh and obedience to His covenant, as they returned to their land from captivity and attempted to rebuild their way of life.

The book of Ezra records 2 separate returns from captivity, the first led by Zerubbabel (536 BC) and the second led by Ezra himself (458 BC). A third return would later be led by Nehemiah (445 BC). Chapters 1-6 recount the first return and the effort to rebuild the altar and temple, amidst great opposition. Chapters 7-10 recount the return led by Ezra and his effort to call the post-exilic community back to obedience to the covenant with Yahweh.

EZRA 1-6: THE REBUILDING OF THE TEMPLE

The first portion of Ezra's book looks back roughly 60 years to the time when the first wave of Jews returned to Jerusalem from captivity. The focus of the narrative is on the rebuilding of the altar and temple of Yahweh by the returned remnant.

The theme of 'REBUILDING' is throughout the Bible. God is a God of second chances and waits to rebuild life where we have torn it down through our own choices. This theme brings HOPE for us today and for all who have looked to God for a fresh start. Whether we are 'building' God's way, or 'rebuilding' to be back on God's path (like in Pilgrim's Progress), the book of Ezra gives us hope and instruction.

God moves King Cyrus' heart to release the Jews: Ch.1

Both Isaiah and Jeremiah had prophesied that Israel would come out of captivity (Isa.44:28; Jeremiah 25:1-14; 29:10), before Cyrus, king of Persia was even born! Ezra records Cyrus' decree, allowing the Jews to return to their land and rebuild their temple (536 BC). Cyrus acknowledged that God had put it in his heart to decree the rebuilding of Yahweh's house in Jerusalem.

Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, "The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah" (1:2).

A large freewill offering was made by the captivity Jews in Persia to support their brethren who were returning to Jerusalem. In addition, Cyrus returned all the precious vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple when he captured the city decades earlier. By His sovereign providence, God persevered all the temple vessels (even much gold) by the powerful gentile world rulers and caused it all to be returned back to Jerusalem.

It bears repeating that God is ALWAYS WORKING! He disciplines nations and individuals in His love and is always watching out for those who want to trust Him. Throughout the entire captivity, God was using the 5 prominent kings of the ruling world empire: Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus, Darius, Xerxes and Artaxerxes to literally declare that Yahweh was the "GOD OF HEAVEN", and all peoples should worship Him. He put a concern for God's people in their hearts, and ensured the return of the temple articles for worship. We constantly need the favor, permission or partnership of authorities to accomplish tasks in life. How has God used authorities to help you advance in your life? Pray to God for the well-being of your authorities and families, and to prepare them for their blessings to be upon you and your endeavors, as Daniel, Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah and countless others did.

God moves the hearts of the returnees: Ch.2

Roughly 50,000 people made the 4-month, 900-mile journey back to Jerusalem. **Zerubbabel** (also called Sheshbazzar), a descendant of King David, was their leader and governor (they were not allowed to have a "king" since they were still subject to Persian rule). Zerubbabel appears in the genealogical lines of Christ (Matthew 1:12,13 through Joseph, and Luke 3:27 through Mary). He was given two great promises through the prophets Haggai and Zechariah: 1) The Spirit of God would enable him to rebuild the

temple, in spite of mountain-like obstacles (Zechariah 4:6-10).
2) The kingdom of God would someday be built through the descendant (Messiah) of Zerubbabel (Haggai 2:21-23). This great leader was God's chosen servant to restore His people to the worship of Yahweh. He foreshadowed Jesus Christ by helping save His people from captivity, bringing them back to God.

The emphasis in this list of returnees fell upon the Levites and priests who had the credentials to serve in the temple. The people 1st returned to their own towns of ancestry and settled their families, then they went to Jerusalem to care of God's business.

The exiles build an altar and worship first: 3:1-7

The first order of business was to build an altar on which the people could offer burnt offerings for their sins to God (3:1-3). Abraham had built an altar when he first entered the Promised Land (Genesis 12:7). They knew they 1st needed the forgiveness of God and then the favor of God on their efforts to rebuild from the rubble of captivity. Jerusalem was little more than a heap of burnt ruins and rubble when they arrived.

"So they set up the altar on its foundation, for they were terrified because of the peoples of the lands; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, burnt offerings morning and evening" (3:3).

They celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles for 7 days as they prepared their hearts for the task ahead. This feast celebrated God's favor and protection over Israel during the 40 years in the desert after coming out of Egypt. Now, the people were in another "desert" – the ruins of post-captivity Jerusalem.

The Jews needed God's protection from the opposition. Yet, they 1st offered burnt offerings humbly requesting His protection. Moses taught the Israelites to 1st focus on this offering. 'If any of you... lay your hand on the head of the male animal, it will be accepted on your behalf to make atonement for you...' (Lev. 1:2-5) We need to realize that God is holy. He welcomes us to pray for anything, yet He cannot go against His own nature to ignore our offenses (sins) against Him and others. They sought God's forgiveness 1st before they sought His protection. How have you offended God, or your spouse, child, relative, friend or coworker? Take time to ask God to search your heart, and admit (confess) to Him what comes to your mind. Then once your spirit feels a sense of forgiveness (1 Jn. 1:9), offer your prayers and requests to Him.

The Temple foundation laid (with mixed feelings): 3:8-13

About 14 months after their return, the people began to rebuild the temple. When the foundation was laid, there were mixed feelings.

"And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. Yet many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' households, the old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, while many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the shout of joy from the sound of the weeping of the people, for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard far away" (3:11-13).

The younger people looked forward with joy and anticipation. But the older crowd looked back with sadness and regret. The "glory days" of Solomon's great temple and kingdom were long gone.

The temple that was rebuilt was much smaller than the one that King Solomon had built, such a disappointment to those who had seen the former magnificent one. God sent a word through the prophet Zechariah, 'Who despises the day of small things?' (Zech 4:10) Culture values bigger, better, more prestigious etc... but GOD values the heart, sincerity and humble devotion to Him, even if it is smaller, less impressive, less of a 'wow'. Do NOT be ashamed (despise) when God starts a 're-do', a work-over in your life. A 'RE-DO' done His way. Don't be ashamed, and don't be regretting the 'do-over' that God is up to in you! He is delighted to start afresh and rebuild a 'new thing' in you. He has allowed perhaps a 'discipline' or 'learning process' for a season- "the WALL" as Peter Scazzero says. Now His approach is 'smaller', less 'wow', or to you- 'less-significant'. Take courage! It will be a much better work, and a testimony to His gracious hand at work in you, so give HIM the glory. That is what matters.

Opposition halts the Temple project: Ch.4

No sooner had the work begun than opposition arose from the Samaritans in the land. When the Assyrians captured the Northern Kingdom of Israel (722 BC), they did not deport the entire population. Instead, they *imported* other ethnicities into Israel so as to destroy the pure bloodline of Israel and create a mixed race. These "part-Jews" became known as the "Samaritans" (since they dwelt in the region of Samaria). It was these Samaritans who came to Zerubbabel asking to take part in the rebuilding of the temple.

But Zerubbabel and company rejected their participation, knowing that they had continued to worship other gods during the previous two centuries and they were not fully devoted to Yahweh.

When the Samaritans were prevented from participating, they made every effort to oppose and halt the Temple project.

“Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and frightened them from building, and hired counselors against them to frustrate their counsel all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia” (4:4,5).

They managed to persuade Artaxerxes, king of Persia, that the Jews had a history of being a rebellious people and that this temple project was really the beginning of their attempt to form their own nation and rebel from Persian rule. Artaxerxes was persuaded by this argument and ordered the work to be stopped.

“Then work on the house of God in Jerusalem ceased, and it was stopped until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia” (4:24).

For roughly 16 years the temple-project sat dormant. During this period, the people focused on building their own personal houses with the timber that had been collected for the temple, while neglecting work on the temple of God. Haggai the prophet confronted the people for putting their personal interests before the work of God, even using what was donated to God.

The book of Ezra (and many others) shows how doing God's will can often bring opposition. Trials don't mean that God is not involved, rather the opposite. So, we should expect it. The Apostle Peter reminded the believers in the early church to “not be surprised at the painful trial you are going through, as if some strange thing were happening to you...” (1Peter 4:12). Satan, the adversary is behind opposition against God's work specifically (1 Peter 5:8,9). Opposition often brings fear from the intimidation and a desire to give up. What kind of opposition causes you to be intimidated and want to give up? How does Ezra warn you and encourage you to be courageous, and keep moving forward?

God's Prophets inspire a re-start: 5:1-6:12

It was the combined voices of Haggai and Zechariah, the two great post-exilic prophets, that stirred the hearts of the people to overcome their fears, reorder their priorities, and to resume work on the temple.

“When the prophets, Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them, then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Joshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God which is in Jerusalem; and the prophets of God were with them supporting them” (5:1,2).

As before, opponents arose to stop the project by appealing to the new king, Darius, to issue a stop-work order. But Darius made a careful search and found the original decree of king Cyrus commanding the Jews to return and rebuild their Temple, thus he issued a decree forbidding anyone to interfere with the work. In fact, the full expenses for the work would be funded by the taxes paid to the king by the opponents of the project!

What are the ‘old tapes’ or ‘messages’ you heard growing up that occasionally stop you from moving forward when discouragement comes? “I am not good enough, smart enough, wealthy enough, pretty enough, desirable enough... they are right.” God’s Word offers TRUE WORDS that God speaks over us, rather than what people have spoken over us. Even in the present, negative words will tear us down and stop us from pressing through the hardship/opposition. What words tend to discourage you? What words from God most encourage you to keep pressing forward in life when you most feel like quitting?

The Temple completed/Passover celebrated: 6:13-22

The completion of the temple took 4-5 more years. Then the people came together for a Passover celebration to celebrate all that God had done to bring them this far.

“And they observed the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for the LORD had caused them to rejoice, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them to encourage them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel” (6:22).

EZRA 7-10: BACK TO THE COVENANT!

The second part of the book records how Ezra led a 2nd smaller wave of returnees back to Jerusalem 60 years later (roughly 1,500 men, plus the women and children). When he returned, he found the community in need of instruction in the Word of God (specifically, the stipulations of the covenant with Yahweh on the dangers of intermarriage with foreigners).

Ezra's life was exemplary, to the Gentile kings Darius 1 and Artaxerxes whom he ministered in Persia under, but also to the Jews living in captivity with him. He was first and foremost a man truly devoted to the knowledge and practice of the Law of Moses in his own personal life, not neglecting prayer and fasting, being humble and fully dependent on his God. But second, he was devoted to teaching it and challenging his fellow Jews to obey it as he did. He was a man whom God could use. However, Ezra continuously gave his powerful, sovereign God all glory and credit for the many circumstances that worked out. "For the gracious hand of God was upon us..."

Ezra's heart for God's Word: 7:1-10

Ezra is introduced as having a significant *high-priestly lineage*. Yet, there is no record of him functioning in the role of high priest. Instead, he is highlighted as a *scribe learned in the laws of God*. He became the preeminent *teacher of God's Word* in the post-exilic period of Israel's history.

"For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the Lord, to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel" (Ezra 7:10).

The phrase, "*set his heart*" denotes a determined decision. Ezra had determined that he would spend his life bringing people into contact with God's Word. Specifically, he determined to: **1) Study the Law of the Lord.** He made sure that he had a thorough understanding of God's Word himself. **2) Practice it.** He determined to apply God's Word to his own life. He would practice what he would preach. **3) Teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.** He would faithfully communicate God's Word to God's people. King Artaxerxes knew about Ezra's devotion to the Word of God and respected him for it.

Culture throughout the ages has always presented alternatives to loving God and living according to His Word- which has been written for our good. Without a determined effort to be personally studying, and in a study of God's Word with others, you will drift along with the culture of your day which will be away from God's truths. Being in a community with others who really want to take God seriously and who are daily attempting to live out God's Word is essential. Who are you studying God's Word with? Have you set your heart to be a man/woman of God's Word?

Artaxerxes decree permitting Ezra to return: 7:11-28

As with the earlier Cyrus decree to Zerubbabel, so Artaxerxes issued a decree permitting Ezra to lead a 2nd wave of people who were willing to go back to Jerusalem. The king sent a great deal of gold with Ezra to support the rebuilding effort, including restoring obedience to the laws for worship and civil life that pleased God. Like Darius, Artaxerxes asked that perhaps his favor toward the Jews would bring back a blessing from the *'God of heaven'*, upon his people and his family. The specific purpose of the decree was to grant Ezra permission to go back and *instruct the post-exilic community* in the laws of God.

"And you, Ezra, in accordance with the wisdom of your God, which you possess, appoint magistrates and judges to administer justice to all the people of Trans-Euphrates—all who know the laws of your God. And you are to teach any who do not know them. Whoever does not obey the law of your God and the law of the king must surely be punished by death, banishment, confiscation of property, or imprisonment" (7:25-26).

Ezra leads the 2nd return, relying upon God: Ch.8

Ezra knew that the 4-month, 900-mile journey to Jerusalem would be difficult. Yet, he had been telling king Artaxerxes how great and powerful his God, Yahweh, was. Therefore, instead of asking the king for troops to protect them, and the gold entrusted to him, he called a day of prayer and fasting so that they could seek the protection of God.

There, by the Ahava Canal, I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask Him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions. I was ashamed to ask the king for soldiers and horsemen to protect us from enemies on the road, because we had told the king, "The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to Him, but His great anger is against all who forsake Him." So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and He answered our prayer (Ezra 8:21-23).

God answered the prayers of His people on their difficult journey.

"The hand of our God was on us, and He protected us from enemies and bandits along the way" (8:31).

The phrase "the hand of God" appears 6 times in Ezra (7:6,9,28; 8:18,22,31). *"If we had interviewed Ezra and asked him the secret of his successful life, he would have said humbly, 'The good hand of the Lord was upon me.'"* (W. Wiersbe)

Ezra was a humble man of faith and integrity. He did his part in living out a life of devotion and faithfulness to God, yet he always wanted GOD to be put on display as the One who was GOOD and who caused all the circumstances to work out. Do you tend to take the credit for ways that you appear to be succeeding? We need to remember that God is the One who endows us with a brain, an opportunity, a talent, a spiritual gift, a family, the country we were born in, favor before an authority etc... Ezra knew that apart from God's good and gracious hand upon himself and his people, they would not be in the place of blessing and protection that they were.

The godly leadership of Ezra has left a legacy of faith from his day until the present. God was pleased to show the gentile king and the people setting out on their journey that He is beyond able to protect and bless those whose hearts are sincerely dependent upon Him

Ezra confronts the inter-marriage problem: Chs.9,10

The final 2 chapters record Ezra's confrontation with the post-exilic community over the sin of intermarriage. When the Israelites first came into the land of Canaan, God had forbidden the men from taking foreign wives, lest their wives turn their hearts away from devotion to Yahweh to serve their idols. (This teaches something of the responsibility of men to love God as their 1st love, because of their tendency to love their women and their women's preferences spiritually more than they love God. King Solomon was the #1 culprit of this. Not a point against women here, but rather that it is harder to be devoted to God whom men don't see, than to women)

whom they do see). This is precisely what happened, and why Israel fell into the sin of idolatry in the first place (leading to their eventual expulsion from the land). Now, in the post-exilic community, the same pattern was repeating. Roughly 100 leaders among the people had divorced their Hebrew wives to marry the local foreign women. (Malachi the prophet confronted the issue of Jewish men divorcing their wives to marry foreigners.) Ezra's reaction to this leadership sin was to fall upon the mercy of God.

"When I heard this, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled. Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel gathered around me because of this unfaithfulness of the exiles. And I sat there appalled until the evening sacrifice" (9:3,4).

Ezra confessed the sins of the people before God (9:5-15). He poured out his heart acknowledging the sin of the people who were in danger of squandering God's gift in allowing them to return from captivity. They were repeating the sins that had caused the discipline and captivity in the 1st place. As he prayed, people gathered around him to openly confess their sins along with him (10:1). Then, the people took an oath to send away their foreign wives. All the people were called to Jerusalem and commanded to send their foreign wives (and children) back to their homelands. While this correction could not be accomplished in a few days, Ezra appointed leaders in every city to oversee the process of holding every man accountable to dismiss his foreign wife. It took three months for all the cases of intermarriage to be dealt with among the post-exilic community.

Attraction is so easy and 'natural' causing a pattern of compromise that leads to ultimate pain. Following the commands of God in faithfulness is a much less travelled road, as it requires a deep love for God and a conviction that His ways are the way to walk in, whether they 'feel good' or not. Where are YOU compromising God's Word, to satisfy your own more 'natural' way of wanting to do life and feel good? Is it relational, educational, recreational, social; regarding your integrity, your health, your family, your job, your marriage or friendships, or...? Be honest with yourself. Ask God to reveal what He sees that you may not see. Once you admit what you see, what steps will you take to undo the compromise that you are in? The 1st step is to admit it to God and to another person who can help hold you accountable to 'rebuild', which is a key theme of the book of Ezra.

Note: The Bible books historically coinciding with Ezra are Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. As these are studied, a more complete portrait of the people's hearts, choices, consequences and applications for us today will be understood. God's Word is written for our instruction to challenge and teach us to walk in His ways. May we all seriously take His Word to heart, like Ezra- to STUDY, APPLY IT, and TEACH IT, by our life and our example to others.

Discussion Questions

(You can review the boxes in the commentary for additional discussion points.)

1. The first part of the book of Ezra is a story of trusting God in the process of rebuilding. There are many lessons we can learn here as we seek to work with God to build, or re-build aspects of our lives today. What lesson/principle stands out most to you from the story of the Jews trying to rebuild their way of life and temple?
2. The second part of the book focuses on Ezra and how God used him as a leader in the post-exilic period. He was many things: a man of the word & prayer, a courageous leader, a witness to the king, a teacher, a priest. How has God used Ezra to challenge and inspire your life?
3. The "hand of God" is repeatedly mentioned in Ezra. This is a metaphor for the protection, favor and blessing of God upon a person or a movement. How have you experienced the hand of God in your own life? How do you need the hand of God right now?