

EZRA 6-7

Transition to the Next Phase of Building

Points of Separation

1. Ezra switches from Aramaic back to Hebrew. (Ezra 6:18-19)¹
2. A shift in focus from external to internal issues
 - Chapters 7-10 no longer focus on Israel's struggle with external adversaries like Persian kings and officials.
 - Focus now turns toward Israel's internal condition and dealing with issues within the congregation and family.
3. Ezra specifically notes the celebration of the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread (Ezra 6:19-22)
 - Carries forward the theme of separation from the nations and their "leaven."
 - A number of people who have chosen to separate themselves from the uncleanness of the nations are allowed to join Israel in the Passover
 - **Exodus theme:** It marks that point of departure from the external struggle with Egypt (Persia) and into a new focus on a becoming a people of God.
 - The first leg of the Exodus journey began with Passover, followed by the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai.
 - The second leg of the journey began with a Passover at Mount Sinai, followed by a sanctification process as Israel journeys to the Land. It ends as they enter the Land, just before Passover.
 - This new phase of building the House of God begins with a Passover, followed by Ezra teaching the Law. The book of Ezra ends in the first month, right before the next Passover celebration.

Points of Separation

4. In chapter 7:27-28, we have an abrupt change in narrative voice
 - Up until Ezra 7:26, the narrative is related as a report by a third person observer
 - Beginning in Chapter 7:27-28, Ezra speak of himself in the first person
5. New king - Artaxerxes
 - The timeline in chapter 6 ends in 6th year of Darius
 - The timeline in chapter 7 begins in the 7th year of Artaxerxes
 - ~60 year gap between these chapters, skipping over the reign of Ahasuerus
6. New leader - Ezra
 - Ezra alone emerges as the main authority figure in this phase of building.¹
 - Artaxerxes decree gives him the right to establish a justice system and execute corporal punishment as needed. He has both a civic and spiritual authority.
7. New generation of people
 - ~80 years since Zerubbabel brought the first wave of returnees to Jerusalem²
 - ~60 years have passed since the completion of the Temple in Darius' reign³

The Big Picture

Three main stages of building the House of God

- Ezra 1-6 focuses on the building of a holy Temple
- Ezra 7-10 focuses on the building of a holy people
- Nehemiah 1-7 focuses on the building of a holy city
- Nehemiah 8-12 ends with the celebration of the completed House of God (Temple, people, city)
- There is a break at each phase, marked by acts of separation. We have come to one of those breaks.

Ezra and Nehemiah give us a micro-view of the work of the House of God that has been going on throughout the ages

- Ezra 1-6 characterizes the Old Testament's focus on the physical Temple, physical priesthood, and worship
- Ezra 7-10 characterizes the New Testament focus on building a spiritual people ¹
- Just as break between Ezra 6 and 7 is marked by the celebration of Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread. In the macro-view, the same point of transition is marked by Christ's death. ²
- The work Ezra does in chapters 7-10 parallels the work going on in the Church age

The Big Picture

Similarity of purpose Ezra's work and the Holy Spirit's work

- Ezra 6 ends with a celebration of Passover (for us, Christ's death) and Ezra would begin his commissioned work in that 1st month just as Passover was being celebrated, and would arrive in Jerusalem shortly after. Ezra's name means "helper" and he is tasked with teaching the people the Law.

In the days before His death, Jesus says to His disciples: *"But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you."* - John 14:26 NKJV

- Involved with teaching the people, cleansing them, interceding for them, and separating them from the sin in their lives and influence of the world.
- Both focus on the building up of a holy people, sanctified for God's purpose.
- Both focus on the condition of the inward man in regards to sin.
- In Ezra 7-10, the focus shifts away from the physical Temple and delays the work on the physical city of Jerusalem. In our Church age, the physical Temple has been taken out of the picture, nor are we tasked with building Jerusalem.

Differences

- There is a difference in how Ezra defines and accomplishes the separation of Israel under the Mosaic Covenant, and how our separation is defined and accomplished under the New Covenant.
- That difference lies in where we stand in relationship to the cross.
- Ezra's effort falls short because he could not accomplish the kind of separation that Jesus effected with His death on the cross. ¹

Ezra 5: Problems with defilement

There have been some problems in the past with defilement, going all the way back to when work on the Temple began. We know this because the Lord speaks to the people about this through Haggai.

A return to worship has been accomplished, but not a return to holiness. **Read Haggai 2:10-14.**

Here the Lord is questioning the priests: *[paraphrase]*

“If something that is holy touches something that isn’t, does it pass its holiness to the unholy?” No.

“If something that is unclean touches something that is clean, what happens?” The clean thing becomes unclean. Uncleanness defiles everything it touches. ¹

“So is this people, this nation, and the work of their hands.” They may be offering sacrifices at the altar as part of worship, but what they offer is unclean because the people are unclean. The people themselves need to be holy and clean before they offer the offerings.

When Haggai gives this message, the people have built the altar, they are worshipping, offering sacrifices and keeping the feasts – including the Passover. They have laid the foundation, but that is where they stopped. They continued to worship but were not engaged in the work of building the House of God. They had gone back to pursuing their own lives and desires. God says their work and their offering is unclean.

Ezra 6: Defilement Cleansed, Temporarily

- It is the first month – the start of a new year.
- The Temple is in place and the priesthood has been cleansed.
- The people have gathered together to celebrate these feasts.
 - Everyone has removed the leaven from their houses, are partaking of the Passover lamb, and celebrating the Feast of Unleavened Bread
- The people of land also join Israel. If they separate themselves from the pagan ways and are consecrated, they are allowed to join Israel in these feasts. This kind of scenario happened once before, many years back in the days of Hezekiah. Read 2 Chron. 30:6-12, 17-22. ¹
- Everyone is joyful. The Lord made them joyful. And the work continues. Building the House of God is not finished yet.

It would seem that the problems of defilement have been resolved by this time. We would like to think this idyllic scene will remain this way.

- 60 years goes by and the next generation takes over.
- By the time Ezra arrives, sin has once more crept back into Israel. Many men have married pagan wives and families have begun to grow from that unholy joining. Pagan influence begins to grow in a very leaven-like way. That theme of removing the leavening in the Feast of Unleavened Bread segues very appropriately into the issue plaguing Israel at Ezra's arrival.
- Ezra will tackle the task of purging that leaven out of Israel – physically separating them from the pagan influence of those wives. Their refining and sanctifying continues on into the book of Nehemiah.

Ezra 6: Defilement Cleansed, Temporarily

In parallel to this, as believers in the Church age,

- We have come out of the nations spiritually, made that identification with our Passover Lamb, and entered into that consecrated relationship with God.
- We have the joy of that indwelling Spirit in us.
- And the work goes on as we begin building one another up as a holy people.
- Now we move from identification with Christ's death into the refining process of sanctification.
- Even though we have a cleansing and covering through the blood of Christ, sin can remain or return and, like leaven, it can begin to grow in our lives. If allowed to grow unchecked, it can bring both spiritual and physical ruin in our lives.
- Just like Israel, every generation faces the problem of falling away and having to return and rebuild the relationship that is lost.
- It is Christ and the Holy Spirit who are now engaged in the ongoing refining process of teaching, cleansing, interceding and separating us from the sin and worldly influence in our spiritual lives.

Observation about the Feasts: Comparison of OT and NT expressions

Both the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread are examples of how the meaning behind practices of faith change between the Old Covenant and New Covenant, depending on where you stand in relationship to the cross. This change takes place when you move from a focus on physical outward requirements to a focus on inward spiritual condition.

- Passover for OT Israel was a memorial of something past – the salvation from death purchased by the blood of the lamb painted on the door posts. It taught that only a covering of blood would cause the Lord's judgment to pass over you. Painting that blood on the doorposts was an act of faith in God that separated Israel from Egypt.
- Passover for us is equated with Christ's death and His blood covers the sin that would bring the Lord's judgment and death on us. Our memorial of this is communion. When we take communion we proclaim the Lord's death till He comes. It is a memorial of looking back, but also of looking forward.
- Before we take communion, we are charged to examine ourselves (1 Corinthians 11:27-29). That self-examination in preparation for communion has a parallel to the preparation for the Feast of Unleavened Bread.
- The morning of Passover, all Israel would clean and sweep the leaven out of their houses (perhaps why it is called the Day of Preparation, Matthew 27:62). Just as they turn their physical cupboards out for inspection before Passover, so we turn our spiritual cupboards out for examination as part of our preparation for communion.

Ezra 7:1-10

What do we know about Ezra?

- Of the lineage of the High Priests
- He was a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses
- He finds favor in the eyes of King Artaxerxes
- He returns from Babylon with a 2nd wave of returnees - priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers
- He begins the journey in the 1st month and arrives in Jerusalem on the 5th month
- His name means “helper”

Things Ezra has tasked himself to do (v10). He prepared his heart to:

- Seek the Law of the Lord ➤ Come to a knowledge of the Lord
- Do the Law of the Lord ➤ Put that knowledge into practice
- Teach the Law of the Lord ➤ Teach others to know and practice

As a priest of the High Priestly lineage, Ezra had a calling and a responsibility to God for the spiritual leadership of Israel. His calling as a priest is not just a duty for Ezra. He truly has a heart for God’s Word. **Psalm 119:41-48.**

Ezra began with a willing mind and heart. He knew what his calling in life was, and as long as he remained a captive in Babylon, that calling must be deferred. And yet his circumstances did not keep him from preparing his heart for the task.

What does God ask of us, regardless of limitations of our circumstances?

2 Corinthians 8:10-12

Foundational truth: You must be both a hearer and a doer of God’s Word
Matthew 7:24-27, James 1:21-25