



EZRA

▶▶ THE RETURN

“RETURN to ME”

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NOTES

A. Introduction

1. Have you ever been discouraged? So very discouraged that your world felt like there was no Hope?
 - a. Optimistic people get discouraged too – Hannah’s comment about if I had a leg cut off – I would still say “ I have another leg!”
 - b. STORY: Pregnant with Josh at 5 months
2. Discouragement can come from a variety of sources: lack of income, difficult children, loss of a loved one, longing for companionship, major illness, divorce, bullying in school or simply making bad choices.
3. Where did you turn? What did you do?
4. **Any of these can lead to a sense of Hopelessness. Today we will look at a community that created a MESS of their lives. Their sense of hopelessness is the result of their own fault.**
5. Today we finish the book of Ezra and the story of the children of Israel where they faced utter hopelessness and it was their fault!
6. Spoil-Alert: There is HOPE at the end of this story!

B. PRAYER

C. SOAP

1. We must remember that the Bible is an ancient document. It is God’s Word so we can learn from it but we will have to see what it is saying to these ancient people before we can find the relevance for us today.
 - a. Ezra was written about 2500 years ago. 2000 years before Shakespeare and we all know how hard it is to understand Shakespeare!
 - b. 2 Tim. 3:16-17 “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work”.
 - c. Let’s use a method called SOAP to try to understand the passage
 - SCRIPTURE: What is it saying?

- OBSERVATION: What does it mean? (To the people it was directed to and then to us)
- APPLICATION: What am I going to do about it?
- PRAYER: How am I going to trust God?

D. SCRIPTURE: What is the book of Ezra Saying?

- a. REVIEW a little bit of the events that bring us to this point.
 - i. Judah (Southern Kingdom of Israelites) are conquered and taken to Babylon as Exiles.
 - ii. In the meantime, Persia conquers Babylonia and the Persian Kings help to support three campaigns of restoring Jerusalem.
 1. #1 - 70 years after the Babylonians take the people into Exile - Return of 50,000 Israelite Remnant to Jerusalem under Zerrubabel's leadership. He and the people struggle but they rebuild Solomon's temple in Jerusalem.
 - a. Sacrificial system is re-instated.
 - b. Foundation of the temple is laid – the presence of God does not descend. "The older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud and others (who had not seen Solomon's temple) shouted with joy. No one could distinguish between the weeping and the shouts of joy because they were making so much noise and heard from a great distance." 3: 12-13
 - a. The work on the temple is stopped due to rumors but eventually it is finished and the people celebrate Passover and rededicate themselves to be separate from the people around them that worship other gods.
 2. #2 - 60 years later – Ezra brings back about a 5000 Israelite Remnant back to Jerusalem.
 - a. King Artaxerxes gives Ezra all the items in the treasury that belong in the temple.
 - b. 9 month journey to Jerusalem
 - c. Ezra is a priest but there are no Levites among them – he sends out a call to the men to come and care for the temple and they respond.
 - d. Ezra discovers that the Israelites had intermarried with foreign woman (violating God's law) They have taken on the culture and customs of the very nations God asked them not to mingle with.
 - i. Priests and Levites lead the way!
 - e. Unfortunately, this is not a new tale for Israel!
 3. #3 – 13 years later – Nehemiah comes to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem – we haven't covered this book but it used to be one book Ezra-Nehemiah. One continuous story.

E. OBSERVATION: What does it mean for the people of that day and for us?

- a. Rick called this a Culture of Compromise – Ezra 9
 - i. **Intermarriage: Why was this a big deal?** Was God against interracial marriage or other nations?
 1. Neither – God was giving these nations a chance to turn to Him. We know He gave these surrounding nations 400 years and their hearts STILL did not soften. So God says – steer clear! He knows that the Israelites will not be able to resist the gods of this culture and the Israelites hearts will be turned away from their God.
 - a. God makes provision for the foreigner in His law so what is the difference here?

- b. Leviticus 19:34 “The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God”.
- c. ILLUSTRATION: Ruth – Moabitess – What is the difference?
 - i. It lies in Ruth’s allegiance. She became a follower of the one true God. She forsook the gods of Moab.
- d. **It isn’t a racial question – it is a spiritual one.**

ii. Sometimes it is appropriate not to be friends with a person or group that lives so contrary to the way that God has called us to live.

- i. Exodus 34:12 “ Don’t make a treaty with the people in the land you are going.”
- ii. Why? – they will lead you astray. You are not strong enough to withstand their influence. The children of Israel did not have a great track record of withstanding the influences of a community that was steeped in the worship of idols. God knew that the two communities could not mix – they needed to remain separate if the children of Israel were going to be faithful to God.
 - 1. British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, was determined to maintain peace with Germany. On September 30, 1938, he received a rowdy homecoming after signing a peace pact with Nazi Germany. His mantra was “Peace in our time” but it was short lived. On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland and Great Britain declared war on Germany two days later. PM Chamberlain thought he could bring peace to their relationship but instead he needed to stand up to a man who was bent on destruction. Had Chamberlain really watched and acted on Hitler’s systematic de-humanizing treatment of the Jews between 1933-1938, he would have known that no friendship could exist with this man.
 - 2. There are no cookie-cutter solutions here. We must get on our knees and ask for wisdom. When is it appropriate to compromise for peace and when do we STEER CLEAR so that we are not lead astray.

iii. Unequally yoked. When we choose to be unequally yoked in our relationships ESPECIALLY in MARRIAGE – we may be RESPONSIBLE for our own exile!

- 1. We become like the people that we share the intimacies of life with.
 - a. QUOTE: “You are the average of your five closest friends”, Craig Groeschel.
- 2. You may be in a dating relationship that you think you can make work because you have a lot in common but if you do not have your faith in Jesus in common – you are unequally yoked. As life goes on those tough decisions that require you both to have the same values at the very core of your relationship will be missing.

F. Ezra Chapter 10

- a. We leave off in the story of Ezra and the Israelites at the point in the story where they are aware that they have sinned greatly by taking wives from the countries around them and reintroduced the worship of other gods and idols.
 - i. **READ: Ezra 10:1** “While Ezra prayed and made this confession, weeping and lying face down on the ground in front of the Temple of God, a very large crowd of people from Israel—men, women, and children—gathered and wept bitterly with him.” Ezra 10:1 NLT

1. Ezra is throwing himself down on the ground – so distraught over the sin of Israel. He carries the sin as their leader.
2. Hebrew indicates that it is a type of raising up and falling to the ground that Ezra does – he is dramatically grieving and it draws the attention of the people.
3. Sounds like Ezra might have inherited the Drama gene – the Nobles have that gene!
4. STORY: One of our kids was 10 and so upset about something that I had asked her to do or not do – she began to fume and scream. She was grieving – go to your room and shut the windows so the neighbors don't think I am killing you. But grieve as long and dramatically as you want.
5. Ezra gets the attention of the people – their disobedience to God is a BIG deal and it will require a drastic change in the culture to get them back on track.
6. **Confession is the first step.**

- b. Ie. Anyone with kids or siblings? Siblings love to confess the sins of their siblings!
 - i. I used to love to read the King James version because I could say “ass” for “donkey” but when I chose to use the King James version of donkey for my brother one day – boy, was I in trouble! Of course, it was my brother who confessed my sin to my Dad AND may I say he EAGERLY confessed my sin!
- c. We live in a culture that likes to confess other people's sin ie. Social media
- d. That isn't what is happening here
 - i. We have a priest (Ezra) taking on the burden of the sin of Israel. He is grieving because the load of the sin is great and sin deserves punishment.
 - ii. As he grieves, one of the leaders suggest a solution.

G. **READ Ezra 10:2-4** “Then Shecaniah son of Jehiel, a descendant of Elam, said to Ezra, “We have been unfaithful to our God, for we have married these pagan women of the land. But in spite of this there is hope for Israel. Let us now make a covenant with our God to divorce our pagan wives and to send them away with their children. We will follow the advice given by you and by the others who respect the commands of our God. Let it be done according to the Law of God. Get up, for it is your duty to tell us how to proceed in setting things straight. We are behind you, so be strong and take action.”

- a. Yikes! That is the best course of action?! I had to resolve this part of Ezra 10 before I could study this chapter. DIVORCE and SEND AWAY the WOMEN and CHILDREN – what? There seems to be all kinds of problems with this suggestion!
- b. First, when studying God's Word – we must remember it is an ancient document that must be interpreted.
 - i. Divorce is common in this day – God doesn't like divorce
 1. Malachi 2:14, “I hate divorce says the Lord God of Israel.” And then later Jesus quotes that verse. Loves the person but hates what divorce does to the people in the relationship.
 2. This may not be the best decision but the Israelites have broken so many of God's laws – they must first get their relationship with God right and separate themselves from whomever is leading them away from God.
 3. Malachi also says that they are neglecting the Sabbath, not taking care of the temple, not bringing their tithes into the temple which was God's provision for the priests and Levites. **They have a lot of issues but ultimately all of these issues are pointing to the fact that God is not #1 to them – it is a heart issue.**

- c. Secondly, What do we know about God’s character – He is JUST and MERCIFUL; FULL of COMPASSION and KINDNESS. We know that provision was made for the poor, outcast, foreigner in the law so provision would have been made for these women and children. They were not abandoned. However, Israel could no longer abide with their worship of other gods and idols and they felt this was the best way to get God back to #1 in their community.
- d. Okay – now we can move onto the next part. What does this mean?
 - i. When we see a behavior or life style that is leading us away from God – we must first CONFESS it. Often leaders help us to do that – Pastors, Spiritual Leaders, Parents, Friends, Family – here it is Ezra and then a leader amongst the people of Israel – he names it.
 - ii. Ezra is calling the people to REPENTANCE – the deep regret of your sin reflected in changed behavior.
 - iii. How do we change our life style to eliminate that behavior?
 - iv. STORY: When Matt and I were first married, I would get frustrated at some of the things that he repeated that bothered me – I would say to him – I don’t want to hear “I am sorry” – I want Repentance which is an apology with changed behavior! Poor Matt – he is such a good man! I was using a bit of my earlier training in theology on him.

H. **READ Ezra 10: 5-11** “So Ezra stood up and demanded that the leaders of the priests and the Levites and all the people of Israel swear that they would do as Shecaniah had said. And they all swore a solemn oath. Then Ezra left the front of the Temple of God and went to the room of Jehohanan son of Eliashib. He spent the night there without eating or drinking anything. He was still in mourning because of the unfaithfulness of the returned exiles.

Then a proclamation was made throughout Judah and Jerusalem that all the exiles should come to Jerusalem. Those who failed to come within three days would, if the leaders and elders so decided, forfeit all their property and be expelled from the assembly of the exiles.

Within three days, all the people of Judah and Benjamin had gathered in Jerusalem. This took place on December 19, and all the people were sitting in the square before the Temple of God. They were trembling both because of the seriousness of the matter and because it was raining. Then Ezra the priest stood and said to them: “You have committed a terrible sin. By marrying pagan women, you have increased Israel’s guilt. So now confess your sin to the LORD, the God of your ancestors, and do what he demands. Separate yourselves from the people of the land and from these pagan women.”

- a. Talk about being discouraged when faced with the destruction of your own choices. **The Israelites had made a mess of their lives.**
- b. Perhaps some of the earlier circumstances in life had caused some of the discouragement they were facing?
 - i. The land was desolate after 70 years of neglect.
 - ii. The work was hard to rebuild and restore.
 - iii. They didn’t have a lot of money (Haggai 1:6) or manpower.
 - iv. They suffered crop failures and drought (Haggai 1:10-11).
 - v. Hostile enemies resisted the work (Ezra 4:1-5).
 - vi. They remembered easier times in Babylon.

- c. Each of these circumstances may have made them feel that God was far away. That can happen to us – we begin to feel like God is distant and go back to habits that we know are not healthy but feel comfortable.
 - d. Zechariah assured them (and us) that God is *not* distant. “If they would **return** to Him, and He would **return** to them.”
 - e. We have free will – God will not force us to worship Him or love Him fully. He desires for us to choose Him. He has already chosen us!
 - i. “For **he chose us** in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.” Ephesians 1:4
 - f. ILLUSTRATION: As a parent, I want my children to CHOOSE to love me – I have already chosen them!
 - g. Despite the reality that we might have some good reasons to be discouraged – God is always with us! **We cannot allow discouragement to develop into Hopelessness and wander from God.** We must TURN or RETURN to God when we are discouraged.
- I. **READ: Ezra 10:12-17.** “Then the whole assembly raised their voices and answered, “Yes, you are right; we must do as you say!” Then they added, “This isn’t something that can be done in a day or two, for many of us are involved in this extremely sinful affair. And this is the rainy season, so we cannot stay out here much longer. Let our leaders act on behalf of us all. Let everyone who has a pagan wife come at a scheduled time, accompanied by the leaders and judges of his city, so that the fierce anger of our God concerning this affair may be turned away from us.” Only Jonathan son of Asahel and Jahzeiah son of Tikvah opposed this course of action, and they were supported by Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite. So this was the plan they followed. Ezra selected leaders to represent their families, designating each of the representatives by name. On December 29, the leaders sat down to investigate the matter. By March 27, the first day of the new year, they had finished dealing with all the men who had married pagan wives.”
- a. “Dealing with all the men” means that they were investigating these men as to which of the wives continued to worship pagan gods. It also assumes that many of the wives had come to faith in the one true God of Israel. It took three months to figure this out.
 - b. ONLY the women who refused to worship the God of Israel would be sent away. Any children who were still primarily under the care of the Mother would be sent with her as well. AGAIN, we see provision in the law for these women – it does not appear they were left desolate. BUT either way – how heart-wrenching would it be to say good bye to your wife and children.
 - c. **DISOBEDIENCE has a price tag and it affects the people around us!**
 - d. However, God always has a plan for HOPE! No matter how far you have strayed from God – YOU can RETURN to HIM!
 - e. Your HOPE, which comes from a relationship with God, will be restored!
- J. **READ Ezra 10:18-44,** “These are the priests who had married pagan wives: **From the family of** Jeshua son of Jehozadak and his brothers: Maaseiah, Eliezer, Jarib, and Gedaliah. They vowed to divorce their wives, and they each acknowledged their guilt by offering a ram as a guilt offering. **From the family of** Immer: Hanani and Zebadiah. **From the family of** Harim: Maaseiah, Elijah, Shemaiah, Jehiel, and

Uzziah. **From the family of** Pashhur: Elioenai, Maaseiah, Ishmael, Nethanel, Jozabad, and Elasah. These are the Levites who were guilty: Jozabad, Shimei, Kelaiah (also called Kelita), Pethahiah, Judah, and Eliezer. This is the singer who was guilty: Eliashib. These are the gatekeepers who were guilty: Shallum, Telem, and Uri. These are the other people of Israel who were guilty. **From the family of** Parosh: Ramiah, Izziah, Malkijah, Mijamin, Eleazar, Hashabiah, and Benaiah. **From the family of** Elam: Mattaniah, Zechariah, Jehiel, Abdi, Jeremoth, and Elijah. **From the family of** Zattu: Elioenai, Eliashib, Mattaniah, Jeremoth, Zabad, and Aziza. **From the family of** Bebai: Jehohanan, Hananiah, Zabbai, and Athlai. **From the family of** Bani: Meshullam, Malluch, Adaiah, Jashub, Sheal, and Jeremoth. **From the family of** Pahath-moab: Adna, Kelal, Benaiah, Maaseiah, Mattaniah, Bezalel, Binnui, and Manasseh. **From the family of** Harim: Eliezer, Ishijah, Malkijah, Shemaiah, Shimeon, Benjamin, Malluch, and Shemariah. **From the family of** Hashum: Mattenai, Mattattah, Zabad, Eliphelet, Jeremai, Manasseh, and Shimei. **From the family of** Bani: Maadai, Amram, Uel, Benaiah, Bedeiah, Keluhi, Vaniah, Meremoth, Eliashib, Mattaniah, Mattenai, and Jaasu. **From the family of** Binnui^[a]: Shimei, Shelemiah, Nathan, Adaiah, Macnadebai, Shashai, Sharai, Azarel, Shelemiah, Shemariah, Shallum, Amariah, and Joseph. **From the family of** Nebo: Jeiel, Mattithiah, Zabad, Zebina, Jaddai, Joel, and Benaiah.

Each of these men had a pagan wife, and some even had children by these wives.”

- a. Not really a list you want to be on! This is the “I have been an idiot” list.
- b. Notice the family groupings? Men who had lead their sons and grandsons astray.
- c. I want to say to these men – Get it together Men! You have allowed the influences of the world to enter into your family. You are the protectors of your families.
- d. Your job is to lead your family into a relationship with God BUT instead you have chosen the ways of the world?
- e. **Our actions reveal the allegiance of our heart. God wants to be FIRST!**
- f. **Confession and Repentance are important habits in our spiritual lives. We will all stray!**
- g. HOWEVER, In the end, these men stepped forward and RETURNED to God and protected the nation of Israel from the influences of the nations around them.

K. APPLICATION: What am I going to do about it?

- a. Have you walked away from God? It could be because of hopelessness, isolation, loneliness but you have chosen to walk away and you need to RETURN to God.
- b. Is there a behavior, in your life, that is destructive? It might be small now but it is leading you away from God? Away from what He teaches is best for you. Do you need to RETURN to God?
- c. Is there a family behavior “generational curse” that you have picked up from your parents/ grandparents that you need to ask God to break? RETURN to God.
- d. The choice is yours – God will not force you to return to Him. He loves you and desires relationship with you but will not force you to RETURN to Him.

L. CLOSE – Dad’s Testimony

My Dad grew up with a Christian Mom – my Grandpa didn’t know Christ when Dad was a child. My Grandmother was a firey, Pentecostal Mother who pray until you were well, said my Dad one day, so you never played “sick” to skip school. She wouldn’t leave you alone until you were healed! Between a firey, Pentecostal,

preacher Mom who planted churches, an alcoholic Dad, the Great Depression, WW2, and being raised in poverty on an Indian Reservation, Dad had a lot of good reasons to walk away from the Jesus that his Mom had committed her life to. It felt like God had abandoned them. Who was this God that allowed so much misery?

So when Dad graduated from High School, he joined the Navy. He shared with us later that he was running away from his Mom and ultimately from God.

After two years of a complete loss of his independence, his tour was over and he was once again released back into society. He ended up visiting a church where his cousins were attending – Bethany Church in Alhambra, Los Angeles. After being there a few times, he began to feel more and more uncomfortable. He would tell us that he could sense the Holy Spirit tugging on his heart and he did not want to respond! One service, the tug was so strong that he got up and left. Halfway down the aisle, an older woman, stepped out and say, “Sonny, you need to be saved!” He kept walking out.

He returned to the church, and this time, he knew it was the Spirit of God calling him to Repentance. This time Dad responded and went forward and confessed his sins and was baptized in the Spirit. He told us later that he didn’t really remember much about that night but it felt like God was doing a lot of deep cleansing! He was washing him from the inside out. He was a new man and it showed to all those who knew him. His allegiance had changed!

There was so much of his past life habits that he had to go before the Lord daily and learn to retrain BUT there was one area that the Lord had delivered. It was his language. He would tell us that he used to “swear like a sailor” but God had taken away every bit of bad language leaving him now with only conjunctions. Hard to carry on a conversation with ...or, nor, for, yet, and, but, still

God desires an unreserved and full relationship with Him. Where does your allegiance lie today? Have you made compromises with the world that have lead you away from God and are affecting the people around you?

Is God calling you to RETURN to Him today?

Our HOPE lies in a completely surrendered heart to God ALONE.

PRAYER: How am I going to Trust God?

God – we trust you with our lives! We come before you as a people ready to confess and repent of our sins. Show us where we need to make amends and heal the broken relationship between you and us. We are your people and desire to lead lives that bear your mark! Give us the courage to Return to you! We know that you are ready to receive us. We simply need to confess and repent of our sins and you will restore us to relationship with your son, Jesus! Amen

References and Resources

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All Biblical passages are NLT unless otherwise noted

Timeline for Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther and the Prophets Zechariah, Haggai, and Malachi

605 BC - Jerusalem is conquered by the Babylonians – the Southern Kingdom (Judah) is taken into Exile

70 year Exile in Babylon (Persia conquers Babylon during this time)

535 BC - Zerubbabel brings 50,000 of the Israelites back to Jerusalem (Persian King Darius)

516 BC - 2nd Temple is built and dedicated in Jerusalem

Zechariah and Haggai – prophets during this time

60 years later

(Esther marries Persian King Xeres and her story takes place during this time)

458 BC - Ezra brings 5,000 people to Jerusalem (Persian King Artaxerxes)

Ezra brings REFORM

13 years later

Malachi – last prophet

445 BC - Nehemiah returns to rebuild Jerusalem's walls (Persian King Artaxerxes)

400 years of silence – no messages from God to His people

JESUS is born