

Through the Bible at 30,000 Feet

Ezra | *When the Word Dwells Among Us*

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The book of Ezra is the story of God's people returning from exile in Babylon and rebuilding a life in the Promised Land.

Last week, we read (in *2 Chronicles*) the story of their **downfall** and the **destruction** of their land and the **desolation** of the temple and the **death** of many of the people and the **exile** of almost everybody else. And by the time we were almost finished with the book, their situation seemed absolutely hopeless.

But... in the last two verses, we saw that God wasn't finished with His people. A new king ascended to the throne in Babylon, and he made a proclamation that all of God's people could go home.

That brings us to the book of Ezra. This is the story of God's people *beginning* to come back home. I say "begin" because they don't all come back at once. In fact, when they are first invited to return, most of the people choose to stay. Only a remnant returns (**9:8**), and many *never* come back.

That's what happens when you immerse yourself in the world. It's pretty easy to get comfortable there.

- Why would we go back to the hardships of Jerusalem when we've made a life for ourselves here in Babylon?
- The only thing waiting for us in Babylon is destroyed walls, a burned temple, plundered homes, and virtually no economy.
- Why would I do that when my life is comfortable and predictable here in Babylon?

We have a little dog named **Bella** who has never been a fan of Minnesota winters. 😊 She doesn't like the cold, and she doesn't like the snow. In the morning, she is excited to get out of her kennel because she needs to do her thing outside. But as soon as I open the door, she just stands there. And then, unless I gently kick her outside, she will often go right back downstairs into her kennel. She wants to go outside, but when she considers how miserable it is out there, she would just assume stay in her kennel all day.

There are 10,000 opportunities for Christians to spend their lives doing AWESOME things for Jesus, but so many never do because they don't want to leave the comfort and the predictability and the sense of security of the status quo. The door is wide open, but instead of walking through it, we just stare at it for a moment before we turn around and go back to the comfort and safety of the life around us.

- What hard thing is God calling you to do?
- And what might God do through your life if you were to leave Babylon behind?

Those who do choose to return come back in stages.

1. Zerubbabel leads the first group back (**Ezra 1–6**)
 - He focused on cleaning up mess and rebuilding the temple.
 - But they experienced what almost everyone experiences when they devoted their lives to following God: *opposition*.
 - **Ezra 4:4–5**
 - **Reality**: when you commit to spending your life for the glory of God, it will not be easy. And there will be days when you feel like it can't possibly be worth the sacrifice.

But as the missionary martyr **Jim Elliot** said, “*He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.*”

- Being a Christian in a **secular workplace** can be really hard. **Marriage** can be really hard. **Raising children** can be really hard. **Pastoring** a church can be really hard. Being a **missionary** can be really hard. Being a Christian in a **public school** can be really hard. **Saving sex** for marriage can be really hard. Refusing to sell out to **pornography** can be really hard. **Covenanting** yourself to a local church family can be hard? **Being honest** and **accountable** to people in your life can be really hard.
- There will be days when all you want to do is quit.¹
 - And that's exactly what Zerubbabel and his people did.
 - **Ezra 4:24**
 - God's dwelling place went untouched for over 15 years.
- But eventually, over 20 years after the project was started, Zerubbabel and his crew finished the temple.
 - **Ezra 6:14, 21–22**

Now if you were reading your Bible chronologically, when you finished reading Ezra chapter 6, you would read the story of **Esther**. Many Bible scholars believe the story of Esther takes place during a 50+ year gap between Ezra 6–7. Lord-willing, will be reading her beautiful story the day after Christmas.

2. Ezra leads the second wave back from Babylon (**Ezra 7–10**)
 - And he focuses on rebuilding the spiritual condition of the people (**7:10**), but it was not an easy task. During the 70-some years that the people had been living back in Jerusalem, they had once again intertwined with the culture around them. Ezra had come to bring the Word of the Lord to this people, but Ezra had no idea just how desperately these people needed the Word until he arrived.
 - When he learns of how Judah had married into the sinful cultural around them, this is what he says... (**9:3–4**).

And then Ezra prays to God, and His prayer reminds us of the hope that we have even in our lowest moments and darkest days. (**9:8–9, 13**).

¹ Throw in the towel. Cash in your chips. Say uncle. Tap the mat. Lick your wounds. Call it good.

- What do we hear in his prayer?
 - Grace
 - Escape
 - Enlightening our eyes
 - Revival
 - God did not forsake us
 - Mercy
 - Worship being restored
 - God has punished us less than our iniquities deserve
- Ezra's book ends with him leading Israel through the steps of repentance.
- 3. **Nehemiah** leads the third wave back, and we will read about his story next Sunday (Lord-willing).

I began the message by quoting from Psalm 138:2 about how God has exalted His Word above all things.

Why begin with that verse?

Because I want us to see how the Word of God drives the story of Ezra?

Read: *Ezra 1:1-3*

- Why does Cyrus set the captives free?
 - Because of the Word of the Lord (1:3)
 - Why do God's people restore the place of worship in Jerusalem?
 - Because of the Word of the Lord (1:1)
 - Why do the people finally finish rebuilding the Temple?
 - Because of the Word of the Lord (6:14)
- They rebuild the altar according to the Word of the Lord (3:2)
 - They reinstitute their celebrations according the Word of the Lord (3:4)
 - They organize the spiritual leadership according to the Word of the Lord (6:18)
 - Repentance and revival swept through the land because of the Word of the Lord (9:4)

The story of Ezra is a picture of what happens when the Word of God dwells among His people. Which brings us to the story of Christmas!

JESUS

John 1:1, 14

The story of Christmas is the Word of God becoming a man.

The miracle of Christmas is that there in Bethlehem, the Word of God was wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger (**Luke 2:7**).

And when He spoke... nothing was ever the same.

When Jesus speaks...

- Sick are healed.
- Sins are forgiven.
- Storms are silenced.
- Satan leaves.
- Spiritual forces tremble.
- Sepulchers release their hostages
- Stones are rolled away, and the dead are raised to life.

And when Jesus says, "It is finished" – it is finished. It's over.

- Satan has lost, because on the cross, the Word of God said, "It is finished."
- Hell has been defeated.
- Our sins have been paid for.
- There is no more shame. There's no more guilt. There is only grace.
- The doors of heaven have been opened.
- The sting of death has been absorbed by Christ.

And when Jesus says, "I am coming back," we know that He is coming back!

In **John 6:68**, many of the people who had been following Jesus for a while left because His teachings got hard. So he turned to his disciples and said, "*Do you also want to go away?*"

Do you remember their answer? "*Where else would we go? You have the words of eternal life.*"

AS THE MUSIC TEAM MAKES THEIR WAY TO THE FRONT,

We are going to close our time of worship with one of my favorite Christmas songs. There is a line in the chorus that hits me every time I hear it, "*Come and see what God has done.*"

- From the shepherds staring out across the sky of angels
- To the disciples staring out across the sea of glass
- To the onlookers staring at Lazarus walking out of the tomb
- To the mourners staring at the Son of God on a cross
- To the women staring at the stone that had been rolled away revealing an empty tomb
- To the followers who were staring at the clouds as Jesus ascended into heaven...
- To the millions of men and women all across the globe who meet with Jesus every morning as they stare into the life-giving Word of God. Come and see what God has done!

The Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us.
Oh come and see what God has done.