

Shepherding Notes

Ezra

By Caleb Bunch

We have enjoyed a long stretch in the New Testament. We are now going to step back into the Old Testament. Today we begin with Ezra. For chapter 1, we are just going to ask and answer three questions.

Where Does Ezra Fit in the Timeline?

The first 17 books of the Bible are (mostly) a chronological retelling of the history of Israel. With few exceptions, these books chronicle all of the major events in Israel's history. The first five books of the Bible are called the Torah, or the books of Moses. The next twelve are known as "the histories." Here is a simple breakdown of the timeline of the twelve books of history.

- Conquest of the Land 1490–1380 BC: Joshua
 - Time of the Judges 1380–1050 BC: Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel 1–8
 - Time of the Kings 1050–586 BC: 1 Samuel 9–31, 2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings, 1–2 Chronicles
 - Babylonian Exile and Post-Exile 586–430 BC: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther
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Who Was Ezra?

Ezra is truly one of the most underrated characters of the Old Testament. Perhaps the easiest way to begin describing his significance is by turning back one page to the last paragraph of 2 Chronicles. Did you notice anything peculiar? Those words are identical to Ezra 1:1–3. The simple answer is that it is the same author. After the exile, Nehemiah was responsible for renewing and rebuilding the physical city of Jerusalem. Ezra was responsible for the renewing and rebuilding of proper forms of worship in Jerusalem. One of the ways that Ezra has most impacted you directly is that he was responsible for collecting, organizing, and writing much of the Old Testament. After Moses, he wrote more of the Old Testament than any other single individual: 1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah, as well as portions of Isaiah.

Who Was Cyrus?

Cyrus was the king of Persia. He is the one who freed Israel from her captivity and allowed the people to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their ancestral home. Roughly 150 years before Cyrus was born, God had prophesied about him by name. It is one of the most specific prophecies ever uttered about anyone other than Jesus Himself.

"Who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose'; saying of Jerusalem, 'She shall be built,' and of the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid.' Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings..." — Isaiah 44:28–45:1

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Ezra 2 is one of those chapters. Most Christians arrive at a chapter like this one and either skim-read it or skip it altogether. It can be very challenging for us to grasp the magnitude of a passage like this. This chapter that brings yawns out of many today would have resulted in loud outcries of joy for those who first read them. These words resulted in parties in the streets and feasts that lasted multiple days. What I want to do today is help you set the stage so that you can join in the celebration appropriately.

After World War II, many concentration camps were found and prisoners were set free. Every single one of those who were released was a number on a report somewhere. Those reports today might look dusty and insignificant. But each and every number represents a captive who was set free.

The Babylonians were clever. They understood that the best way to destroy a nation completely was by killing all of the people who might rise up to fight and keeping those who would submit as a servant class. They knew that the best way to get the Jews to cease to exist was to turn them into Babylonians. That is why it was such a big deal for Nebuchadnezzar to force Daniel and his friends to eat the king's food. By refusing to conform, they were rejecting the state-sponsored retraining of the Jewish youths. Most nations that Babylon controlled were wiped out in a single generation through this method of assimilation.

The Jews, however, did not assimilate. They continued to operate as a separate people during their time in exile. That is why Daniel was so hated by all of his contemporaries to the extent that they would attempt to have him killed by lions. It was only during their exile that the people finally learned the meaning of being a called-out, separate, holy nation.

Many people saw their parents and grandparents die in captivity. Many set their hope on the promises that God made to restore them after a time of judgment. Imagine waking up each day knowing that you deserved judgment and wondering if restoration would ever come — and then one day hearing the words, "Cyrus has declared that we are free to go home!"

Ezra 2:1 says, "Now these were the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of those exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried captive to Babylonia. They returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town." Every one of the numbers in this chapter represents actual people who had been set free by the mercy

of God. You can see the overwhelming thankfulness of these people by their generosity toward the temple rebuilding project in vs. 68–69.

This idea should not be too foreign to you. If you are in Christ, you have been set free from the greater exile. You have been given the grace to be welcomed into the true kingdom of God and will enjoy the heavenly Jerusalem forever. Does your thankfulness to God reflect the gift that you have received?

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Here in chapter three we find that work on the temple has finally begun. But the big picture is that proper worship of the Lord was beginning to be practiced as God had commanded so long before. Generation after generation had ignored God's Word and instead decided to worship however they pleased. Let me draw your attention to three simple truths about true worship that we find in this passage.

According to God's Word

The notorious verse in Judges that says, "Each man did according to what was right in his own eyes" applied to every aspect of their life, including worship. Ezra is about worshiping the Lord rightly. And how did Ezra and the other faithful men of Israel conclude what was right? One of the recurring statements you will find in Ezra is some version of what he says in vs. 2: "as it is written in the Law of Moses the man of God." Styles change. New songs are written as old ones are forgotten. Languages morph over time. Clothing, architecture, and service times all change. Why is it acceptable for those things to shift over time? Because the Bible doesn't give instruction as to how they must look. However, there are many aspects of corporate worship that are clearly defined by Scripture. We do not chase trends, philosophies of ministry, or formats that would water down, obscure, or otherwise misrepresent the gospel.

Shadow and Substance

The Jews were reimplementing the Old Testament practices that were given to them by God. What they didn't understand is that each one of those forms of worship was done in order to represent the coming Christ. The sacrifices, feasts, and festivals were all shadows — Jesus is the substance. For example, this chapter specifically highlights the reimplementation of the feast of booths (also known as the feast of tabernacles). This is when the Israelites were told to basically go camp for a week, just like they did during the wilderness wanderings. (Lev. 23:33–43) However, this was also a foreshadowing that the Son of God would one day come and tabernacle among us. (John 1:14)

Sing

Verse 11 says, "And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, 'For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.'" Responsive singing means that the song leader would sing a line, and the people would sing in response the refrain,

"For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever." The song that they were singing was Psalm 136. Notice that their singing was shaped by "the directions of David king of Israel." (vs. 10) In other words, the lyrics of their songs and the style of song were determined by the clear teaching of Scripture.

All too often the singing at church is treated by so many of us as a concert where we observe but do not engage. These people were not hindered by the fact that they were tone-deaf. They did not stop singing because there were distractions. It did not matter if they were thirsty or hot. The Lord is worthy of your voice being raised with loud songs of praise. If you can celebrate more for a band or a sports team than you can for your Savior, then much work must be done to recalibrate your priorities.

These people were so emotional about the physical foundation of a building being laid so that they could regularly gather and worship. We have the true and better Temple, Jesus Christ. He is the cornerstone that has been placed as an unmovable foundation of the church. When we gather, we sing to celebrate something greater than the shadow of the temple — we gather to celebrate Christ. That should cause your heart to sing.

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Romans 1:30 lists various sins displayed in the lives of those who suppress the truth in unrighteousness. One item on that infamous list is that some people are "haters of God." God haters hate God worshipers. They hate anything that would possibly bring glory to God. In Ezra chapter 4, we encounter people who make it their life mission to stop the rebuilding of the temple at all costs.

Who Were These Enemies?

Although we think and often speak of the Jews as one nation, it is important to remember that they actually existed for the majority of the age of kings as two distinct nations that were often in conflict with one another. The Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrian Empire around 722 B.C. After the Northern Kingdom was destroyed, matters got much worse because of one word — resettlement. The Assyrians killed most of the men of Israel, then imported slaves and war criminals from across the region to marry the women who had survived. Over the course of time, the people began to adopt some of the teachings of the Old Covenant, but they simply added God to their already extensive pantheon of regional deities.

So who are these people? They are syncretistic, greedy, deceptive, idol worshipers intent on keeping the people of God from rebuilding their city or renewing worship to the Lord. You probably know them better by the name used for them in the New Testament — the Samaritans.

Syncretism

The first approach of "the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin" was to act as a Trojan Horse. They claimed that they worshiped the same God and therefore should be permitted to assist in the rebuilding of the temple. They were rejected by the Jews because it was clear that they were not worshiping the same God. True worship cannot be mixed with idol worship.

Intimidation

"Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build." (vs. 4) These Jews were men and women of vigor and fortitude. To make the trek from Babylon to Jerusalem — a distance of nearly 1,700 miles — is an incredible task. The people likely walked much of that distance, pulling carts with all of their belongings

behind them, traveling one of the most dangerous roads in one of the most unforgiving climates in the world. In short, the intimidation tactics they were facing would have been severe threats of violence. However, the people of God are always called to obey the Lord, even in the face of an opposing military force.

Government Intervention

The enemies of God Most High will often seek the highest power they can find as a substitute. That tends to be earthly rulers. God haters will seek legal means to obstruct, deter, hinder, or eliminate true worship. In this chapter, they wrote to the king and manipulated him into revoking the Jews' ability to rebuild. Thankfully, they were soon able to restart their efforts. But before we leave off for the day, it is important to remember that there is no earthly government that will ever be capable of suppressing the church. In fact, many of the places where the government is most hostile to the people of God are also the places where the gospel is spreading most rapidly. No government can stop or even slow down the perfect plan of God.

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In Romans 8:31, Paul asks a very poignant rhetorical question: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" We find over and over again in the Scriptures that God rules over the rulers. This chapter might be a bit confusing at first glance. Let me lay out a timeline that may help you understand the events.

- Yesterday we read that the Jews had been ordered by Artaxerxes to stop building the temple. Fearing another exile, they ceased their construction.
- Artaxerxes died and Darius became king.
- Haggai and Zechariah prophesied to the people and called upon them to stop fearing the king and start building again. (vs. 1)
- The people heard God's command through the prophets and began building once again. (vs. 2)
- The governor of the region, Tattenai, rebuked the people saying that they had no authority to build. In fact, they were under strict orders from the previous administration that they were not permitted to do any work on the city or temple. He asked for a list of the men who were disobeying so that he might report them. (vs. 3–5)
- Tattenai wrote a letter to the new king, Darius, to inform him of the Jews' renewed efforts of rebuilding their city.

The letter contained the exact words that the Jews had said. They make two claims to authority. First, they give the history of God's role in the exile and return of the Jews to Jerusalem — everything they say to the king is stated in theological terms. Their major claim is found in verse 11: "We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the house that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished." By calling themselves servants of God, they are claiming to be doing His will. They are informing their earthly king that they must answer to a higher authority. Secondly, they defend their actions by appealing to the decree of Cyrus, even suggesting that the king search the book of history in the Babylonian archives to see the decree for himself.

What are we to glean from a passage like this one? At the very simplest, there is an answer given as to how we must respond when the government and God's Word are at odds. It can be summed up in the words of the apostles in Acts 5:29: "We must obey God rather than men." It is good to honor the government and those who have been given a place of authority over you. However, if there is ever a conflict of ideals or practices between God and government, listen to and obey God rather than government. His Word is not ambiguous about most things. It contains everything you need for life and godliness. If you fear government more than you fear God, then you have made the government your false god.

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ACTS 5:29

Proverbs 21:1 says, "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will." We see that in action here in Ezra 6. The Israelites had been told that it was illegal to do what God had commanded them to do. God said to build; the king and governor said not to build. Yesterday we read the letter that the Israelites sent to the king, declaring that they must obey God either way. Today we read the king's response. But before even reading it, understand why it is that he had favor on the Jews. We find the reason in verse 22: God "had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel." This chapter is all about God lavishing His favor on His people. Let's consider three things that we see God do here.

He Provides the Sacrifice

Just in verse 17, we read that the Israelites killed 712 animals for sacrifices when they finished and dedicated the temple. That is a lot of animals that would normally feed a lot of people. Where did these animals come from? According to verse 9, King Darius provided them out of his own flocks and herds so that they might be used for sacrifices. The Israelites needed these provisions so that they could worship "as it is written in the Book of Moses." (vs. 18) A central theme of the gospel is this: God provides what God demands.

He Provides Protection

Not only does the Lord turn Darius' heart to provide — He also causes the king to protect the Jews from the hostile or deceitful enemies who might seek to subvert them. He goes so far as to promise to take a beam from a person's house and have them impaled upon it. The enemies of God's people would be displayed publicly on a piece of wood in order to bring maximum shame. The gospel teaches us that the church is protected because Jesus was displayed on a piece of wood, receiving maximum shame on our behalf.

He Provides Joy

When they had dedicated the temple and practiced the Passover, Ezra tells us that "the Lord had made them joyful." That is an incredibly interesting statement. Do you have joy? If not, there is only one place to get it. Sometimes we do not have joy simply because we are failing to worship God as He prescribes. We ignore our Bibles, forget to pray, avoid

church gatherings, and set our attention on everything except God — and then wonder why we can't find any joy. Serving the Lord properly, worshiping Him faithfully, and practicing prescribed forms of thanksgiving to Him resulted in God making them joyful.

Jesus tells us that He has come to give us His joy and so that our joy might be full. (John 15:11) But the only way that we can have His joy is through abiding in Him. Are you lacking joy today? Pray that the Lord would grant it to you. But along with your prayer, begin practicing the Christian disciplines that the Lord designed to bring joy into your life.

"God provides what God demands. The church is protected because Jesus was displayed on a piece of wood, receiving maximum shame on our behalf."

There are two aspects of Ezra that I haven't explained that are probably very helpful. My goal today is to help you get a rudimentary grasp of these two historical matters so as to clear up as much possible confusion as possible. First, I intend to explain the timeline of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther so that you can understand how they fit together. Secondly, I would like to help you get a better understanding of the kings of Babylon, Media, and Persia.

Timeline of Return and Resettlement

For most of my life as a Christian, I thought about the return from exile as a singular event — I imagined everyone in the Persian Empire packing up and moving as a single nation back to the Promised Land like they did in the Exodus. However, that is not how it played out. The first six chapters were recounting the initial return and rebuilding of the temple. Now, as we move forward, we are going to see the next stages of the resettlement of the land.

- 536–516 BC — Ezra 1–6: Return under Zerubbabel / Rebuilding of the Temple
- 484–465 BC — The Book of Esther: King Ahasuerus and the Protection of the Jews
- 458–444 BC — Ezra 7–10: Return under Ezra / Reforming of Worship
- 444–425 BC — The Book of Nehemiah: Constructing the Walls of Jerusalem

Take note of just how long it is from start to finish. The original return to the completion of the temple spans a whopping 111 years. This resettlement took many years.

Timeline of Kings

There are many challenges when seeking to string together the list of kings found in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. Some kings are not mentioned in the Bible. Some kings ruled at the same time, sometimes ruling over each other. Many of the kings had multiple names and titles in multiple languages. Multiple empires ruled over Israel, not just one. Here is the most basic timeline that matches the kings with the chapters of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther.

- Nebuchadnezzar 605–562 BC — Captivity begins (Daniel 1–4)
- Belshazzar ~544–539 BC — Fall of Babylon (Daniel 5)
- Darius the Mede 539–537 BC — Vassal king for Cyrus (Daniel 6)
- Cyrus 536–530 BC — Ezra 1–3
- Ahasuerus (Cambyses) 529–522 BC — The Book of Esther / Ezra 4–5
- Darius the Great (Artaxerxes) 521–486 BC — Ezra 6
- Artaxerxes 464–424 BC — Ezra 7–10 / Nehemiah 1–13

"The hand of the Lord his God was on him. For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the Lord, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel." — Ezra 7:9–10

Ezra 8 begins with a list of the families who returned to Jerusalem along with Ezra. Although this list might not seem awe-inspiring at first glance, consider the following three things that it reveals.

- This is a list of the men and it contains roughly 1,500 people. That does not include the headcount of women and children. That means that this caravan was actually closer to around 5,000 people.
 - Each one of these names and numbers represents a real person who had a real life with real struggles. Each one of them was set free from captivity and returned to their homeland.
 - There are many detractors and critics of the Bible who argue that it is a book of fairy tales. However, the Bible is the most accurate record of world events ever written. Lists such as this one are matters of historical record that lend credence and credibility to the text.
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No Levites

In verses 15–20, Ezra encounters a major problem while they are encamped near the river in what is now called Hamath in Syria. As he was examining the lists of all the people returning with him, he came to the realization that there were no Levites. Why does that matter? Because Ezra's entire mission was to restore proper, God-prescribed worship to the people of Israel. According to the Law of Moses, the sacrifices and ceremonies had to be carried out by priests from the tribe of Levi. No Levites = no biblical sacrifices = no foreshadowing of the gospel. So Ezra sent messengers to Levites still living in the land of Persia to call on them to return and reinstate proper worship. And they came. But don't overlook what Ezra says in verse 18. He tells us exactly why these people determined to make the difficult journey back to Jerusalem — this was all accomplished "by the good hand of our God on us." God gave them favor and caused the hearts of the Levites to be moved to desire to return.

Faith on Trial

I did the conversions into today's exchange rate and found that Ezra and his crew were carrying roughly \$20 million of gold and \$18 million of silver. That does not include all of the coins and other costly items. This was a soft target carrying a treasure trove across

one of the most dangerous roads for bandits. Ezra could have asked the king for a military escort, but he chose not to. Why not? Because he had already told the king that the Lord would protect them. Now Ezra's faith was on trial.

This is why he gathered the people to fast and pray for protection on their journey. How did that turn out for them? Verse 23 tells us, "So we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty." God answers prayer. When they arrived they weighed all of the treasure to ensure that it had all made it without being pilfered. Everything arrived safe and sound and there was no theft from the ranks of the people. The people of Israel were finally more concerned with worshiping the Lord than they were with their wallets.

"God answers prayer. Ezra's faith was on trial – and God was faithful. So we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty."

EZRA 8:23

As you began reading this chapter, I wonder if you responded the same way that I did: by shaking your head with bewilderment at the Jews' almost instant return to the very sins that resulted in their exile. To be clear, marrying someone of another race was not the problem. Ruth married Boaz and that marriage was applauded. The difference is that Ruth had said those all-important words to Naomi, "Your God will be my God." (Ruth 1:16) Ruth was effectively a convert to Judaism before she married a Jew. That is not what was taking place in Ezra 9. The problem was that the people had "not separated themselves from the peoples of the land with their abominations..." (vs. 1) The Israelites were allowing paganism to once again seep into their homes and families. We can learn a great deal from how Ezra responded.

Sin Is Both Individual and Corporate

Every single person who sinned by marrying into a pagan family was individually choosing to sin. They will also be judged individually on the last day. However, your sin always affects more than just you. Sin always has consequences, and the blast radius of those consequences often hits the people you love the most. In regards to the nation of Israel, the blessings and curses of the Mosaic Covenant were contingent upon the entire group. We see an excellent example of that in Joshua 7, when the Israelites lost their first battle. They could not understand why God would allow them to suffer defeat. God revealed to them that it was due to the sin of one man — Achan — who had disobeyed and stolen some of the spoils of war. Sin hurts everyone around you. This is also true in the church.

Prayer Is Both Individual and Corporate

Notice how Ezra prays when he discovers the sin being committed. He does not ask the Lord to correct "those people." He acknowledges that he is part of a larger collective of people that have failed to honor God's commands. His prayer includes 12 uses of the word "us" and 8 uses of the word "we." He is identifying himself as part of a group that needs to be forgiven and transformed. This is likely the best example of corporate prayer of repentance in the entire Bible. This is why we will occasionally have a corporate prayer of repentance at our church — we collectively ask the Lord for forgiveness and plead with Him to grow our congregation in holiness.

God's Chastening and Discipline Is a Kindness

Consider what Ezra states in verse 13: "You, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved..." Ezra was observing the continuation of sin in a people who had been disciplined through exile and returned to their homeland. Instead of being transformed completely, they had reformed minimally at best. They were like dogs returning to their vomit. (Proverbs 26:11, 2 Peter 2:22)

How often are we just like them? We who have been saved by grace, redeemed by the blood of Christ, and forgiven of our trespasses, find ways to slip back into some of the same things we did before knowing Jesus. Ezra was right in saying that God's chastening hand in the exile was a kindness. It was a display of gracious restraint. They deserved much worse. Brothers and sisters, we deserved much worse. Hell was the proper cost of our iniquity. The result of that should propel you and me to live holy lives — and it should cause us to repent with the same depth of conviction that we see in Ezra in this chapter.

"You, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved." The chastening hand of God is a kindness — a display of gracious restraint. We deserved much worse."

Are you willing to do whatever it takes to honor the Lord? Are you willing to give up the dreams, aspirations, relationships, and pastimes that you know are leading you into sin? True repentance means more than just feeling bad about your sin. It means more than just promising to stop sinning in the future. It means doing whatever it takes to honor the Lord. In some extreme cases, Jesus speaks metaphorically in terms of radical amputation: "If your arm causes you to sin, cut it off..." Of course that is not literal. However, it is a way that Jesus explained the radical nature of repentance.

In our text today, we see the people join Ezra in sorrow when their sin was pointed out. They did not defend themselves. They did not seek to minimize their actions. They did not try to retain what they had gained in sin. Instead, they honored the Lord by sending their new brides back to their families. This might seem extreme, or even heartless, to readers with modern sensibilities and American cultural understandings of marriage. Some of these marriages were on paper — agreements made with the father of the family. Others were married in the full sense, to the extent that they had children. However, God did not sanction or allow any of those marriages to stand. Scholars believe that by "sending them away," they were sending them with the financial support necessary to uphold them for a time.

The book of Ezra ends with the Jews finally doing what their forefathers failed to do. They repented. They took seriously the sin that they had committed and took the necessary steps to make it right. Let's conclude this book with two truths that you should know.

- God is NOT calling you to send your spouse away. We are no longer under the Mosaic Law and we are free to marry people from any tribe, tongue, or nation. The stipulation is that believers should marry believers. But if the Lord saves you and not your spouse, you are not to leave them.
 - God IS calling you to radically repent of sin. Cut off all avenues to it. But unlike the Israelites did in Ezra 10, you do not need to make a sacrifice. God has made the sacrifice for you in His Son, Jesus. It is because of Christ that you are forgiven and accepted.
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"True repentance means doing whatever it takes to honor the Lord. Unlike the Israelites in Ezra 10, you do not need to make a sacrifice – God has made the sacrifice for you in His Son, Jesus."