

## Lesson 2

Last week we began looking at reasons for spending so much time studying Ezra, and the first five we considered were that Ezra teaches us about history, Ezra teaches us about fulfilled prophecy, Ezra teaches us about leadership, Ezra teaches us about dealing with criticism, and Ezra teaches us about restoration.

### Reason #6: Ezra teaches us about the church

It is easy to become discouraged when we look at the sad state of many congregations of the Lord's church. Women are assuming leadership roles; musical instruments are entering the worship service; elders are disappearing; baptism is being watered down. But Ezra has a message for us, and it is message of purity, proper worship, continuity, and restoration. The message of Ezra is a message we need to hear. It is a message of encouragement for the faithful remnant.

A major focus of the book of Ezra is the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem following its destruction many years earlier by Nebuchadnezzar.

When the New Testament opens, the rebuilt temple is in Jerusalem (with some major additions built by Herod). When the New Testament ends, the temple is once again destroyed, but something infinitely better has taken its place – the church. Is that something we see in Ezra?

Yes, we see that in Ezra, we see that in prophets long before Ezra (Isaiah), we see that in prophets shortly before Ezra (Daniel and Ezekiel), and we see that in prophets contemporaneous with Ezra (Haggai and Zechariah).

Do you mean that the prophets foretold the destruction of the very temple that was being rebuilt at this time? Yes, and for an example, let's look at Haggai 2.

Haggai prophesied during the time of the book of Ezra, and in fact Haggai is mentioned by name in Ezra 5:1 and 6:14.

In Haggai 2:6-7, we read:

“For thus saith the LORD of hosts; Yet once, it is a little while, and I will **shake** the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land; And I will **shake** all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the LORD of hosts.”

And then turn to Hebrews 12:26-29 –

“Whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I **shake** not the earth only, but also heaven. 27 And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are **shaken**, as of things that are made, that those things which **cannot be shaken** may remain. 28 Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which **cannot be moved**, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: 29 For our God is a consuming fire.”

And what is this “shaking” in Haggai 2 and Hebrews 12 describing? Turn to Matthew 24:29 –

“Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be **shaken**.”

Verse 34 of Matthew 24 confirms that verse 29 is describing a **first century event** – the destruction of the temple and the city of Jerusalem in AD 70.

And what replaced that temple? Hebrews 12:28 just told us – “Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved.” Verse 27 tells us that the church cannot be shaken. That immovable unshakable kingdom of Hebrews is the indestructible kingdom of Daniel 2:44 –

“And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever.”

This rebuilt temple in Ezra was never intended to be permanent, but rather would be replaced by something that was permanent and indestructible and immovable – the church of Christ.

The church was established in Acts 2, and the Jewish temple was destroyed about 40 years later in AD 70, just as Jesus had described in Matthews 24.

We also learn something about the return of the exiles from Babylon and the connection of that return with the church from Ezekiel. Daniel, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah lived at the same time, but only Daniel and Ezekiel were exiled to Babylon – Jeremiah stayed behind. And while Daniel lived in the king’s palace, Ezekiel lived and prophesied among the exiles.

Ezekiel 37 begins with one of the most amazing and well known prophecies in the entire Bible. Ezekiel is taken in a vision to a valley filled with human bones that had been dried, bleached, and scattered.

In verse 3 he hears a question that must have seemed preposterous to him: “Son of man, can these bones live?” But Ezekiel’s answer in verse 3 indicates his appreciation for God’s power. “O Lord GOD, thou knowest.”

God tells him to preach to these dead, dry bones, and he obeys despite the apparent absurdity. He tells the bones to hear the word of the Lord! (Whenever we are tempted not to proclaim God’s word because we think we already know our audience’s response – remember Ezekiel! Did any preacher ever have a deader audience?)

Ezekiel’s obedience produces immediate results. Even before he finishes, he hears the noise of the bones coming together and being covered by flesh. They stand up as a vast, living, reconstituted army.

In verses 11-14, God interprets the vision for Ezekiel. This vision was God’s response to the people’s feeling of hopelessness. “Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.”

Can these bones live? Can a dead and powerless nation in exile and under the control of a godless

nation be resurrected and become a living, thriving kingdom once again?

God's message was that the nation would live again; the people would settle again in their own land; and, the people would know that it was God who had brought them back to life.

Starting in verse 15 of Ezekiel 37, Ezekiel has another vision that was a sequel to the vision of the dry bones.

Ezekiel was commanded to perform a symbolic action. He took two sticks and identified them with inscriptions denoting the two former kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Ezekiel then made one stick of the two by holding them together. Through this symbolic action he portrayed the reunification of the revived nation.

Note: Ezekiel used "Joseph" and "Ephraim" to denote the Northern kingdom. Jereboam I was an Ephraimite (1 Kings 12:25). Ephraim was a popular designation of the northern tribes under his leadership (Hosea 4:16-17). (Manasseh and Ephraim were sons of Joseph.)

In verse 18 he is asked what this all means. Ezekiel explains that God was going to join (literally "give") Joseph to Judah (verse 19). God was going to restore and reunite the nation under one king (verses 18-22). Further, the nation would never again be divided (verse 22) and never again would the people serve idols (verse 23). The restored nation would have David as its king (verse 24). They would be united under one shepherd (verse 24). They would live under a covenant of peace (verse 26).

The people would dwell securely forever (verse 25), and a sanctuary would be built among them that would remain forever (verse 26). The word "olam" meaning forever or everlasting is used five times in Ezekiel 37:25-28, and it is the same word used to describe the everlasting kingdom in Daniel 2:44.

Were the people united under one king from the line of David after their return from exile? No – Cyrus remained their king. Were they restored to one nation? No – the Northern tribes never returned. They remained divided. Were they united under one shepherd? Did they live under a covenant of peace? Did they dwell in the land securely forever? Did the new temple remain forever? No.

Those things did not happen when the exiles returned – but they did happen. They are all blessings enjoyed by the church. Ezekiel 37 begins by describing the blessings enjoyed by the returned exiles – but it ends by describing the blessings that God had in store for the church.

Those prophecies were fulfilled not by the rebuilt temple but by the eternal kingdom that came into being in the first century as Daniel had foretold.

In short, we you study about the return from exile in Ezra you are studying about the church. There is no other way to read Ezekiel 37. The two are intricately intertwined. We, like the Jews of Ezra's day, have come out of exile and into the kingdom of God.

**Colossians 1:13** – "Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son."

The return from exile in the days of Ezra was just a small foretaste of what God had in store for his faithful people. The fullness of God's plan would come five centuries later when the eternal king came into this world as a "babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." (Luke 2:12)

### **Reason #7: Ezra teaches us about God's Plan**

**Ephesians 1:4** – "According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love."

That verse tells us that God has a plan for our redemption, and that plan was being carried out before the foundation of the world. Ezra tells us a great deal about God's plan.

One thing we see over and over in that plan is God bringing his people out of exile. The Jews were brought out of Egyptian exile, they were brought out of Babylonian exile, and we have been brought out of exile of the power of darkness. God rescues his people. The prophecy of Matthew 24, for example, includes signs of the destruction of Jerusalem – why? So that God's people could see the signs and escape the destruction. God rescues his people.

This part of God's plan is, not surprisingly, a major theme of Ezra. At few times in history were God's people in more need of rescue than when this book opens – and God provides it.

Ezra repeatedly shows the Jews that they were the continuation of the chosen Jewish nation prior to the exile. One way that this continuity is emphasized is by allusions to the exodus, with the idea being that the returnees had experienced a new exodus. As soon as the new temple was completed, they celebrated the Passover (Ezra 6:19-22). Later, after reading the Law, they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles (Neh. 8).

God's providential care is repeatedly emphasized to show that God's redemptive plan was continuing to work through the Jewish people.

It was God who was responsible for the decree of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1). He also secured the permission for construction to continue (Ezra 5:5; 6:14; 6:22) and for Ezra and his group to come to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:27). He even protected them on the way (Ezra 8:22). It was God who secured Nehemiah's appointment as governor (Neh. 2:8) and guided him in all the details of the construction of the wall (Neh. 4:14; 4:20). God frustrated the plans of the Jews' enemies and preserved the Jewish people.

Ezra and Nehemiah emphasize that God can use even foreign rulers to fulfill his purposes on behalf of his people. This is noted in the Edict of Cyrus (Ezra 1:6), in Artaxerxes' letter to Ezra (7:11-27), and in many details of Nehemiah's assignment (Neh. 1-6). God's sovereignty encompasses the entire world to carry out his redemptive plan.

This continuation of the people of God also meant the continuation of the covenant. This little community of returned Jewish exiles was receiving the blessings of God's covenant with Abraham and with Israel at Sinai.

Ezra and Nehemiah recognized and confessed that the people broke the covenant and for that reason suffered the captivity. But they appealed to God's covenant mercy and promises for the

reestablishment of the covenant community.

In fact, this new situation under foreign rule meant that the Jewish people became again more strictly a covenant community and not a nation as in the monarchy. The community's identity did not now depend on its political institutions and identity as a nation but on its special covenant relation to God.

In God's providence this was a step in the preparation for the New Testament transition to the church under the new covenant in which all believers are one in Christ and where physical, ethnic, political, and geographic distinctions are overcome.

### **Reason #8: Ezra teaches us about separation**

**2 Corinthians 6:17** – “Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you.”

There is a strong emphasis in Ezra on separation from any form of defilement with the surrounding people. The Jews who returned were a tiny island in a great sea of people and religions. It was important that they remain pure in doctrine, customs, and ethics.

Being “in the world, but not of the world” and trusting the “good hand of God” when confronted with the secular fist were among the more prominent problems the Israelites faced.

Some of Ezra's actions may seem harsh to some, but those actions show us how important it was in God's plan that this covenant nation continue. The people had been carried into exile because they broke the covenant, and Ezra did not want it to happen again. (Sadly, it would happen again when most of Israel rejected Christ.)

This was a crucial point in the history of the Jewish people. Unchecked assimilation would have meant the end of their role in God's plan.

The church needs to hear this message today. We know that we cannot completely separate ourselves from the world “for then must ye needs go out of the world.” (1 Corinthians 5:10) We must be in the world to preach the gospel to the lost. But the command of 2 Corinthians 6:17 remains: “Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you.”

One way in which we are called to be separate is the same way that the exiled Jews were called to be separate – not separate from people who reject God, but separate from people who claim to worship the same God, but who do not worship him in spirit and in truth.

Listen to what the exiles heard from their neighbors in Ezra 4:2 and ask yourself if we hear similar questions today: “Let us build with you: for we seek your God, as ye do.”

And the response? Verse 3 – “Ye have nothing to do with us.” That response might seem unloving or un-neighborly to some, but it was, of course, the proper response as the remainder of Ezra shows again and again.

Ask yourself how the book of Ezra would have turned out had Ezra opened the doors wide to all

who claimed to seek God as they did. Ezra knew that claim was false. How? Because he knew the law of God, and he knew those neighbors were not following it. Their disobedience put the lie to their claim to seek God as Ezra did.

### **Reason #9: Ezra teaches us about scripture**

Ezra repeatedly affirms the centrality of the Law of God in the life of his people. That has always been the case. God's people love and follow God's word. One of the clearest ways to see those who are **not** God's people is to see how they treat (or rather mistreat) the word of God.

The revival in Ezra started with those who “trembled at the words of the God of Israel” (Ezra 9:4; 10:3). Ezra calls the people back to “the Law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given” (Ezra 7:6). Ezra repeatedly says that the people acted “in accordance with what is written” (Ezra 3:2-4; 6:18).

More than anywhere else in Scripture, these books show the power of God at work through written texts.

In Ezra 7:25, King Artaxerxes writes to Ezra and says: “And thou, Ezra, after the wisdom of thy God, that is in thine hand.” What was in Ezra's hand? The law of God, which is the wisdom of God. Is it in our hands?

### **Reason #10: Ezra teaches us about worship**

Worship is central in Ezra and also in Nehemiah. When the first group of exiles returned from Babylon, they first built an altar to sacrifice to God; only afterwards did they build the temple. Still later they built the walls. Worship was their top priority.

“In an age of experienced-centered, clap-happy worship and entertain-ment-orientated evangelism the books of Ezra and Nehemiah direct our thoughts to a holy God who demands reverent worship and uncompromising loyalty from his people.”

The temple was vital to the Jewish people. Why? Because it was a symbol of God's presence and because it was a reminder that they were to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6).

When the temple was completed, the people celebrated with a large dedication service, where they “offered a hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred male lambs and, as a sin offering for all Israel twelve male goats” (Ezra 6:17). Soon afterward they celebrated the Passover. Then when the city wall was complete another great celebration was held (Neh. 12:27-13:3).

Worship plays a central role in this book. The people wanted to worship, they loved to worship, and they celebrated when they were able to worship God once again in the way that he wanted to be worshipped.

Their desire to protect the purity of their worship explains their emphasis on separation.

If anyone sees worship as a dull, boring affair – that person needs to study Ezra. By studying Ezra, we may see worship in a new light.

If we were suddenly unable to worship here because we had been dragged off into exile somewhere – and if one day we were able to return here and worship again – what would that worship service be like? Would we perhaps return with a new appreciation for the blessings we enjoy when we worship God at this place?

Our worship should be a delight to us!

**C.S. Lewis:** “The most valuable thing the Psalms do for me is to express the same delight in God which made David dance.”

The exiles experienced that delight when they first returned.

Did the exiles’ excitement in worship last? Sadly, no, at least for many of them. The delight and the excitement seem to have faded for many. Malachi preached to the people not long after Ezra and Nehemiah returned, and here is how he described the people’s view of worship in his day: “Ye said also, Behold, what a weariness is it! and ye have snuffed at it.” (Malachi 1:13)

Where do we fall on the scale between those who longed and loved to worship and those who snuffed at worship?

John 4:24 – “God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.”

Spirit alone is not enough, and truth alone is not enough. We must worship in spirit and in truth, and Ezra provides some wonderful examples of proper worship.

### **Reason #11: Ezra teaches us about prayer**

The importance of prayer is taken for granted throughout both Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezra’s lengthy prayer in Ezra 9 shows his belief that God hears and answers prayer.

The work of Ezra and Nehemiah was immersed in prayer. Before starting out on the journey to Jerusalem, Ezra proclaimed a fast “so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey” (Ezra 8:21). Nehemiah fasted and prayed “for some days” (Neh. 1:4) before attempting to ask the king’s permission to return to Jerusalem. Nehemiah constantly mentions short prayers that he made in moments of crisis (e.g., Neh. 2:4-5). He presents us with an admirable example of combining prayer with action. Several times he asked God to “remember” him (Neh. 5:19; 13:14,22,31). Both Ezra and Nehemiah can teach us a great deal about trusting God in prayer.

One thing we see clearly in Ezra is that prayer is a responsibility. Throughout the Bible we see God acting on behalf of his people in response to their prayers, and perhaps nowhere do we see that more clearly than in the various returns from exile.

Prayer preceded the liberation of God’s people from Egyptian bondage.

**Deuteronomy 4:7** – For what nation is there so great, who hath God so nigh unto them, as the Lord our God is in all things that we call upon him for?

Prayer preceded the liberation of God’s people from Babylonian captivity.

**Daniel 9:17** – Now therefore, O our God, hear the prayer of thy servant, and his supplications, and cause thy face to shine upon thy sanctuary that is desolate, for the Lord's sake.

Prayer preceded the victory of God's people from Roman persecution.

**Revelation 6:10** – And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?

Could God deliver his people absent any prayers for such deliverance? Yes, he could. Does God deliver his people absent prayer? It is hard to find examples of such in the Bible.

If we are oppressed and persecuted and surrounded, then we need to start praying. That is the example of Scripture in general and the example of Ezra in particular, and we see God moving mountain after mountain in response to such prayers.

If we fail to receive that deliverance, the reason may be very simple.

**James 4:2-3** – “Ye have not, because ye ask not.”

Prayer is a great responsibility. God is standing by to move mountains and fling open doors of opportunity – but we must ask.

And when we ask, we should ask big. Is there any mountain God cannot move? Is there any door God cannot open? Ezra did not think so.

## **Reason #12: Ezra teaches us about faith**

The books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther provide many examples of what faith can accomplish.

Through faith the temple was rebuilt. Although there were obstacles, eventually God granted them success. We see in Ezra many great examples of faith. In fact, we will see, as with Hebrews 11, Ezra includes its own roll call of faith.

“Today there are many problems in the Lord's church. Commitment to truth seems to have diminished among those in whom it once appeared to be strong. Many are saddened at the apostasy of some churches and brethren and the wishy-washy attitude of others. Historically God's people have endured such challenges and discouragement. The way out is through faith. God is not unaware of the problems or those who often feel alone in upholding His ways. If faithful churches and brethren focus only on the problems, it will result in shrinkage and more loss. In addition to meeting the challenges that false brethren pose, we must continue preaching the Gospel to all the world, restoring the pattern, and trusting in God's providence. As those of Nehemiah's day, we need to use one hand to hold a sword (to defend against error) and use the other hand to build the wall of the church (each new convert being a living stone). God will grant success.”

## **Where Are We and How Did We Get Here?**

When Ezra opens, God's people are living in Babylon under a Persian king. How did they get there? We need to answer that question before we can fully appreciate what was involved in getting them back to Jerusalem.



At the beginning of the book of Daniel, Babylon had conquered Israel and carried Daniel and his friends into captivity. By the end of that book, Babylon is gone, and the Medes and the Persians are in control.

Daniel had prophesied about four earthly kingdoms—Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome— that would be followed by the eternal kingdom, the church. Our studies in Ezra and Esther will center on the second earthly kingdom in that list: Medo-Persia. All of the events in Ezra and Esther (and also in Nehemiah) took place during the time of the Persian Empire.

Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar in 587 B.C. Jerusalem was destroyed, many of the Jews were killed, and most of the others were carried off to Babylon. After Nebuchadnezzar's death in 562 B.C., the empire declined rapidly.

Amel-marduk (the Evil-merodach who released Jehoiachin in 2 Kings 25:27-30), Nebuchadnezzar's son, reigned for only two years; then his brother-in-law, Nergal-shar-usur, reigned for four years. He left a son whom rebels removed; and Nabonidus and his son Belshazzar became the last kings of Babylon (556-539), reigning as co-regents.

Nabonidus was not very popular in Babylon, especially among the priests of Marduk. He and his mother were devotees of the moon god, Sin, whose religious center was in Haran. Therefore, he neglected the Babylonian religious ceremonies centered on the worship of Marduk. Nabonidus spent much of his time in the desert area southeast of Edom and left the affairs of Babylon in the hands of Belshazzar, as we see in Daniel. The internal dissension resulting from Nabonidus's poor leadership made the empire ripe for conquest.

Both the Medes and the Persians were Aryan (Indo-European) tribes who moved south from Russia. First they settled in the northwestern part of Iran but later migrated further south. The Medes occupied the western part of Iran south of the Caspian Sea, while the Persians moved farther to the southeast to part of Iran just north of the Persian Gulf.

The Persian kings were called the "Achaemenids" (a-KEY-muh-nids) after the founder of the dynasty, Achaemenes, who was followed by Teispes (Cispis). We have record of two branches of Teispes' family. One son, Cyrus I, ruled from 640 to 600; and his son, Cambyses I, ruled from 600 to 559. Cambyses I was the father of Cyrus the Great. After the reign of Cambyses II, who followed Cyrus the Great, Darius the Great took over the throne. But he was from the other branch of the Achaemenian family, through Teispes' other son, Ariaramnes.

Until the time of Cyrus the Great, the Persians were vassals of the Medes. The Babylonian king Nabonidus rejoiced when Cyrus rebelled against Astyages (As-tee'-a-gees), the last king of the Median empire, and even helped him at first. By 550 Cyrus had defeated Astyages and taken over the whole Median Empire. The nobles of both Media and Persia gave him their support and named him king of the Medes and Persians.

Babylon had reason to fear the growing empire to the north. Cyrus quickly marched across Upper Mesopotamia, conquering Armenia, Cappadocia, and Cilicia; then he defeated Croesus, king of Lydia, in 547, gaining control over the Greek cities in Asia Minor. He then conquered more territory in the east into what is now Afghanistan; so the Persian Empire reached from there to the western shores of Asia Minor. It was only a matter of time before Cyrus would take over Babylon.