



“Rebuild: An Old Testament Study of Ezra and Nehemiah”

Session 4: A Second Return by God’s Good Hand

July 9, 2024

6:30 PM

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank You for the exemplary life of Ezra and the way that he set his heart to know, study, and teach Your Word. As we study his story tonight, develop in us an increasing desire to study, practice, and share the truth of the glorious gospel of Christ from this day forward, and we pray that we may be used by You to turn the hearts of some who have strayed from the way of salvation, back to Yourself. This we ask in Jesus' name, AMEN.

Session 3 Recap

Two weeks ago in Session 3, we started with the Temple rebuilding having stopped because of opposition, and for a time the adversaries seemed to have won. Chapters 5 and 6 showed God’s sovereign hand in the resumption and completion of the work – culminating in a joyful dedication of the rebuilt Temple and the celebration of ceremonial practices there. These passages complete the book’s first half, resolving the story of the first group of returned exiles under Zerubbabel. In these chapters, we saw how God sent the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to encourage the people to resume the work of rebuilding the Temple – not just as speakers of encouragement, but fellow workers as well.

Opening Question...

What are some recent ways you have experienced God’s protection or provision?

Ezra Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 Overview

After the Temple is rebuilt, the book of Ezra moves forward approximately 60 years to focus on the second returning group, this group led by Ezra. There is a new Persian King, King Artaxerxes I, but there is the same pattern of God's sovereign direction of the king to bless and prosper the returning remnant to Jerusalem. Chapters 7 and 8 mirror the process or preparation we saw in Ezra chapters 1 and 2. Now, it is Ezra sent by the King, this time not to rebuild the Temple but to teach the "laws of the land" – rebuilding the community.

Scripture Focus – Ezra Chapter 7 (verses 1 – 28)

Vs. 1 – 5 – There is a gap of almost 60 years between the events of chapters 6 and 7. One important biblical note: the story in the book of Esther occurred during this time, in the reign of Ahasuerus, who ruled from 486 to 465 BC. Artaxerxes, his son, became king in 465 BC. Ezra returned to Jerusalem in 458 BC.

One special note about this "mini" genealogy – notice who Ezra's line is traced back to – Aaron, the chief priest. Ezra would be in the lineage of the priestly class. This would be important as he sought to rebuild the "community" of Jerusalem. (When reading any ancient genealogy, take special note of where it begins and where it ends – these are intentional markings by the author.)

Vs. 6 - 10 – Eighty years after the first exiles returned to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel, Ezra himself returned to Jerusalem. This was his first trip, and it took about four months. The Temple has been standing for about 58 years. Up to this point, Ezra had remained in Babylon, probably compiling a record of the events that had taken place so far.

Why did Ezra have to ask the new king if he could return to Jerusalem? Ezra wanted to lead many Jews back to Jerusalem. Not as many as the first return, but still a good number. He needed a decree from the King, which would state that any Jew that wanted to return could do so. This decree would serve similar to a "passport" today – given privilege to travel through land, but also in case they ran into any opposition. They would be protected by the Persian empire. The king's generous decree showed that God was blessing Ezra. This also probably indicated that Ezra was probably a prominent member in Artaxerxes's kingdom. Ezra was willing to give up his

position in order to return to Jerusalem and teach the Jewish people God's laws.

One special note about the character of Ezra – Ezra demonstrates how a gifted teacher can move God's people forward. He was effective because he was a well-versed student of the law of the Lord, and because he was determined to follow these laws. Ezra taught through both his speaking and his example. This should be a model that all Christians should follow.

Vs. 11 – 26 – King Artaxerxes I issued the decree giving Ezra and whichever Jews wanted to return to Jerusalem a free pass. In the decree, the King mentions the “seven counselors” in verse 14, this would be something similar to the supreme court for the Persian king. Artaxerxes, like his predecessor, provided whatever Ezra and his traveling companions needed to return, for the worship needed along the way, and additional resources when they arrived. Remember, when the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the Temple, he took a vast amount of plunder that may have included a copy of the book of the Law as well as numerous Temple treasures.

It is possible that the Book of the Law was brought by the Jews into exile and was confiscated and read by their conquerors. Foreign leaders who worshiped many gods liked to have records of the gods of other nations for military and political reasons. King Artaxerxes I wanted to be in the “good graces” of the Jewish people's God, thus the reason for the numerous gifts. Little did the king realize that he could not purchase the favor of the One True God.

One interesting note from verse 24. Why did Artaxerxes exempt the temple workers from paying taxes? The king recognized that the priests and Levites filled a vital role in society as spiritual leaders, so he freed them of tax burdens.

Vs. 27 – 28 – In Ezra's doxology, he acknowledges that God “put such a thing as thing in the king's heart.” This is not the first time we see that God changing the heart of a ruler. God can change a king's heart. God can change our hearts. When we face life's challenges, we often must work diligently and with extraordinary effort, realizing that God oversees all our work. Recognize His hand in your success, and remember to praise Him for his help and protection.

Ezra praised God for all that God had done for him and through him. Ezra had honored God throughout his life, and God chose to honor him. Ezra could have assumed that his own greatness and charisma had won over the king and his princes, but he gave the credit to God. We, too, should be grateful to God for our success and not think we did it in our own power.

One note about the rest of the book. In verse 28, Ezra is writing in first person. He writes in first person for the remainder of the book.

Follow Up Questions...

1. What do you note from chapter 7 about Ezra that makes him highly qualified to lead the second group of Jewish people back to Jerusalem? Why are these characteristics important in a godly leader?
2. Artaxerxes I was a pagan king, but what do you find admirable about his approach to the One True God?
3. How does Ezra respond to such abundant provision on his return? How should our response to God's provision mirror Ezra's response to abundant provision?

Scripture Focus – Ezra Chapter 8 (verses 1 – 36)

Vs. 1 – 14 – The opening verses of Chapter 8 give a listing of the individuals that returned with Ezra to Jerusalem, similar to Chapter 2 and the list of family members who returned with Zerubbabel.

Vs. 15 – 20 – Ezra's progress back to Jerusalem was halted while he waited to recruit Levites. When the families gathered to return, Ezra noticed that no one from the priestly class was returning, thus causing a problem of worship on their return. The Levites had been called to a special service, and yet few were willing to volunteer when their services were needed. God has gifted each of us with abilities so we can make a contribution to His kingdom work. Do not wait to be recruited, but look for opportunities to volunteer. Do not hinder God's work by holding back.

Vs. 21 - 23 – Ezra and the Jewish people would travel approximately 900 miles on foot. The trip would take them through dangerous and difficult territory and would last four months. They prayed that God would give them a

safe journey. Our journeys today may not be as difficult and dangerous as Ezra's, but we should recognize our need to ask God for guidance and protection.

Before making all the physical preparations for the journey, Ezra made spiritual preparations. Their prayers and fasting prepared them spiritually by showing their dependence on God for protection, their faith that God was in control, and their affirmation that they were not strong enough to make the trip without Him. When we take time to put God first in any endeavor, we are preparing well for whatever lies ahead.

Ezra knew God's promises to protect His people, but he did not take them for granted. He also knew that God's blessings are appropriated through prayer, so Ezra and the people humbled themselves by fasting and praying. Their prayers were answered. Fasting humbled them because going without food was a reminder of their complete dependence on God. It also gave them more time to pray and meditate on God.

Prayer was essential too. Too often we pray superficially. Serious prayer, by contrast, requires concentration. It puts us in touch with God's will and can really change us. Without serious prayer, we reduce God to a quick-service pharmacist with painkillers for our every ailment.

Vs. 24 – 32 – Ezra identified trusted individuals in charge to transport the treasures they had been given to be placed in the Temple. To give you an idea of the weight and the amount that the items cost: the 650 talents of silver mentioned in verse 26 would be about 25 tons heavy. This was a large amount of treasure to transport, with or without a detachment of soldiers for protection. And that was just the silver talents!

Every object used in Temple service was dedicated and consecrated to God. Each was considered a holy treasure to be guarded carefully and set apart for His special use. Stewardship means taking special care of whatever God has entrusted to us. This means considering what God has given to you as being from Him and for His use.

Vs. 33 – 36 – Once the items were weighed and placed in the Temple, they then worshiped by lifting sacrifices to God. As we will see with Ezra, worship is the key to rebuilding the community of Jerusalem.

Follow Up Questions...

1. Why do you think Ezra began the journey by asking the people to fast and humble themselves before God? How can this be a model for us when we are about to face life-changing events?
2. How did Ezra demonstrate that he had complete confidence in God's protection?
3. What are some things that tend to inhibit your ability to trust God with your needs?
4. How has God helped you to overcome these hindrances and trust more fully in Him?
5. How have you seen God prove to be faithful to you in the past? How does remembering what God has done for you in the past influence your attitude toward your present needs?

One Additional Note...

God commanded Ezra to return to Jerusalem and to start rebuilding the community of faith. There are three different approaches we see in this passage, and we might take toward God's commands:

1. We might **feel burdened** by God's commands, trying to appease or earn points with God, like King Artaxerxes did.
2. We might **sidestep** God's commands, preferring to decide for ourselves what is best, even if we call it living for God.
3. We might love God's commands and follow them, like Ezra.

Closing Prayer

Father, thank you for your constant care for us. You have proven time and time again that you are a loving Father who always protects and provides for His children. Help us to put our full confidence in you and trust you with our daily needs. May we rest secure in your loving arms. Amen.

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Session 5 – People Rebuilding & Confession

Tuesday, July 16 6:30 PM

Ezra Chapters 9 & 10

Facebook Live
