

"WALK THRU THE BIBLE: EZRA."

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Text for Sermon: Ezra 1:1-4; 7:1a, 6, 9-10; 9:1a, 4-5; 10-12

Introduction to Ezra.

My second son, Kent, works for a tech company that specializes in enabling online retail companies to process returns. It is a massive part of online sales. Amazon processes 3,500 returns every day. Some online clothing retailers can have as much as a 40% return of products sold. The logistics behind that are staggering.

Ezra and Nehemiah are about the logistics of a great return, the return of the exiled nation of Judah, some tens of thousands of Jews, from Babylon back to Israel. Actually Babylon was under new management, having been taken over by Persia, and Persia had a very liberal return policy. In fact they encouraged it.

Persia by the way is modern day Iran and the surrounding area of the world. Modern Iranians are descended from the Persians.

There are two returns in Ezra, Zerubbabel in Ezra 1-2; Ezra in 7 and a third wave of returns in Nehemiah lead by Zerubbabel in 7-13.

In the Hebrew Bible, the two books were considered one work. The two books weren't divided until the third century after Christ by the early church father Origen.

Ezra and Nehemiah offer the final piece of Old Testament history, one last glimpse of God's people living out His redemptive plan before the coming of the Messiah.

Ezra and Nehemiah don't get a lot of attention from pastors except when a church is in a building project, then these books come in handy.

Book of Ezra.

The book is named after a man who doesn't appear until chapter seven of the book.

The short book divides easily into two separate time periods directly following the seventy years of Babylonian captivity. Ezra spans a period of about a hundred years. Ezra 1-6 covers the first waves of Jews returning from captivity, led by Zerubbabel—a

period of twenty-three years beginning with the edict of Cyrus of Persia and ending at the rebuilding of the second temple in Jerusalem (538–515 BC).

Ezra 7–10 picks up the story more than sixty years later, when Ezra led the second group of exiles to Israel (458 BC). The ministry of Ezra covers about one year. Between these two separate series of events the Book of Ezra records nothing. The events in the Book of Esther took place during those years (in 482-473 B.C.). The book of Ezra and then Nehemiah record the last events, chronologically, in the Old Testament.

Exile.

Since the exile figures so prominently let's remember why it happened. Israel had fallen prey to and into the temptations of the abominations of the nations around them, nations God had warned them about and told them to root out of the land. They fell into practicing every form of idolatry, false worship and sexual immorality.

So God gave them up and handed them over to Babylon which was the fountainhead of idolatry and demon-inspired worship and wickedness. With satanic ingenuity they devised every imaginable means of turning man away from the truth of the revelation of God in creation and in Word.

Why would God send His rebellious, sinful people into such a den of iniquity? To cure them of their deeply rooted love of idolatry. To give them the bitterest taste of the folly and wickedness of forsaking to one true God. Their bondage in the very stronghold of pagan corruption cured them of worshiping images and idols and brought about a revival of devotion to God.

It is interesting to note that after 500 years of idolatrous practices since the time Judges in the Promised Land, the Jews did not return to those practices again to the time of Christ.

As we have seen with the other historical books, Ezra is basically a book of history designed to teach theology, and meant to edify and correct the returning Israelites, and us.

Ezra and Nehemiah preserve us from a gloomy pessimism and fatalistic perspective on the future. God is God and this is God's world and He is establishing His kingdom and the kingdom of His beloved Son.

Is there any hope for the people of God? The answer is yes but success depends on *three things*.

First, the sovereignty and supremacy of the person and work of God must be re-established in the minds and hearts of the people of God, and to the neighboring nations.

Second, the people of God must restore their own identity as the covenant people and this must be incarnated in the rebuilding of the Temple and restoring of the central rituals of worship with the priesthood and the sacrifices.

Third, the people of God must return to holiness by their separation from the sinful practices they had fallen into. They must restore the importance of spiritual disciplines such as prayer, fasting, sacrificing, and reading of the Scriptures.

Ezra-Nehemiah is a scriptural manual on revival. God's people rise and fall during their spiritual journey, and Ezra-Nehemiah addresses this perennial issue. I encourage you to read these two books with your own need for spiritual revival and renewal in mind and pray for the Spirit to fruitfully apply His Word to your own life. Pray and read for the sake of your soul.

The hand of God.

Let's look at these three dominant themes in Ezra.

First, the sovereignty and supremacy of the person and work of God must be re-established in the minds and hearts of the people of God, and to the neighboring nations.

Remember what God did to Pharaoh's heart in Egypt. He hardened it (Ex. 7:3; 9:12). At the beginning of this new exodus back to Judah, God does the opposite, He stirs up the heart of Cyrus.

Remember **Proverbs 21:1** A king's heart is like streams of water in the Lord's hand; he directs it wherever he chooses.

God directs it all like a stream of water. How did the returning people succeed? By the sovereign hand of God. A key phrase in Ezra is the hand of the Lord, the hand of God.

The instruments in the hands of God are amazingly diverse. In reestablishing Israel as God's people and God's instrument for blessing the world, God used outside nations and foreign, pagan kings like Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes, who don't just let the people return, they encourage them and give them what they need. And God exerted His hand over many inside the nation like Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and Ezra.

Note especially God's sovereign hand working. Zerubbabel was a descendant of King Jehoiachin, meaning he was part of the royal line of David. The messianic line is kept. And Jeshua was a descendant of Aaron, a member of the priestly family. The history, heritage and future blessing of Israel are not lost in exile, but restored.

God is the Lord of history and all its details. He fulfills all His will, guided by His wisdom, His grace and His love for His people. By His hand He accomplishes everything He sets out to do and He clears the path for the exiles to return and to rebuild.

Are you anxious or worried about the outcome of the elections? Do you get concerned about what our national or state government is doing? This world belongs to God, the nations are His footstool. History is God's story, God's drama is being played out on this world stage.

Are you still wondering how God can work all things together for the good of those who are called by His name (Romans 8:28)? Faith sees the hand of God at work in all things, causing all things to work for His glory and our good.

I watch for the hand of God in my life all the time. It is a great source of encouragement, assurance, confidence, joy and peace. I don't just look for it in the big things, the birth of a baby, a near miss accident, a good parking spot at Costco.

Let me give a recent example. On Wednesday evening during our worship planning meeting we were discussing which question and answer from the Heidelberg Catechism to include in this evening's worship service. We debated between Q 27 or 28 or both. We had started with 28, but Bev was leaning towards 27. Either one was good, but decided to go with 27.

Then on Thursday in my study on Ezra I saw a strong theme of the hand of God. Then on Friday morning as I was reading through the bulletin and read Heidelberg Q 27 which has the hand of God mentioned twice. Coincidence, no big deal? No, I saw the hand of God leading, guiding, directing, and it led me to pause and give praise and glory and thanks to God for His interest and kindness in the very smallest of details of life.

God wants to reveal to you and through you to those around you that He is an awesome God and He really does rule and reign, not just with His people of old, but today. God wants to be worshipped by you in the greatest and smallest details of your life.

Temple.

Second, the people of God must restore their own identity as the covenant people and this must be incarnated in the rebuilding of the Temple and restoring of the central rituals of worship with the priesthood and the sacrifices.

In chapter 3 when the foundation was laid:

Ezra 3:10-13 And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the Lord, according to the directions of David king of Israel. 11 And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, “For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.”

And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. 12 But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, 13 so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away.

Ezra 6:15 is climax of book when the Temple is completed.

Why was the temple so important? What is the big deal? Is it just a place of worship, and if so why wouldn't any place work?

The tabernacle and then the temple were the only place where the people of God could make atonement for their sins by means of the sacrifice of the blood of animals.

On the Day of Atonement the high priest enter the Holy of Holies to atone for his sins and the sins of his people. Here the burden and guilt and shame of their sins was lifted, covered, removed, forgiven by God.

When the temple was destroyed, this precious gift and opportunity was lost. This was catastrophic, their entire religious life was thrown upside down.

No wonder the very first thing they set out to do when they returned was to rebuild the temple. This was not just the restoration of an old building, this was a restoration of highest religious significance, a restoration of worship and atonement for sin.

This is why the atonement of Christ on the cross in His blood is the very cornerstone of our faith. Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. Everything in the OT anticipates the glory to be revealed in the NT. Read Hebrews.

Hebrews 9:11-13 When Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) 12 he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.

Though the people had resumed the temple practices, they needed the word of God at the center of their worship, so God sent Ezra.

Ezra 7 – 10 Ezra the scribe returns.

The people continued to disregard the righteous demands of God's holy law. This is why the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah figure so prominently in the books.

They are called to return not just to the temple and its sacrifices, but to the covenant relationship with the holy God. This is why there was such a call for purity of religion and a separation of what is impure, unholy in every day life.

Third, the people of God must return to the practices of holiness by their separation from the sinful practices they had fallen into. They must restore the importance of spiritual disciplines such as prayer, fasting, sacrificing, and reading of the Scriptures.

We see something new and interesting with the arrival of Ezra. Ezra was a scribe. We hear about them in the NT, but this is the beginning. A scribe was a student, interpreter, teacher, and preacher of the Word of God. Ezra might be the first Pharisee. There is a shift from oral to written authority.

Ezra calls the people to a radical separation from evil, for all sin and immorality, from all that is contrary to God. This includes a separation from foreign marriage.

Ezra 10:10–11 You have broken faith and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. Now then make confession to the Lord, the God of your fathers and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives.

Let me just quickly say, this is not a prohibition to interracial marriage, skin color is not the issue. This is an issue of the heart. Don't marry those who don't worship God. Separate yourself from idolaters. Don't be yoked to unbelievers. Don't date anyone who is not a Christian.

In other words, don't be friends with world. Do you want to know who or what you will be like a year from now? Look at who or what you are friends with now, with what company you keep. Look at what on-line fire hydrant you are drinking from.

Jesus.

How do the returns from exile and the rebuilding projects fit in the bigger story of God's redemptive purposes in history? How do they point the way or pave the way to Christ? How do they apply in our lives? How does this further our being conformed to the image of Christ?

There is a clear sense of a fresh start, a new beginning. A new exodus, a return from exile, a new covenant, a new conquest, a new David, a new experience of the Spirit, new hearts, in a new Eden.

Jesus is gathering a remnant, His kingdom, He will always have a people, from every tribe, tongue, language and people.

God always saves a tiny remnant for Himself—Noah and his family from the destruction of the flood; Lot's family from Sodom and Gomorrah; the 7,000 prophets reserved in Israel despite the persecution of Ahab and Jezebel. When the Israelites were taken into captivity in Egypt, God delivered His remnant and took them to the Promised Land.

The gates of hell will never prevail against the Church of Jesus Christ.

Jesus restores those who wander and are lost. The second chance for the returning exiles reminds me of the wonderful story of Peter being restored after he denied Jesus, and of the wonderful story of the prodigal son.

The Book of Ezra is a chronicle of hope and restoration. For the Christian whose life is scarred by sin and rebellion against God, there is great hope that ours is a God of forgiveness, a God who will not turn His back on us when we seek Him in repentance and brokenness. The return of the Israelites to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple are repeated in the life of every Christian who returns from the captivity of sin and rebellion against God and finds in Him a loving welcome home. No matter how long we have been away, He is ready to forgive us and receive us back into His family. He is willing to show us how to rebuild our lives and resurrect our hearts, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit.

(<https://www.gotquestions.org/Book-of-Ezra.html>)

Implications and application.

Even after 70 years of God's discipline in exile, God's people still struggle with sin. Our old nature doesn't die easily. We must constantly confess and repent and seek God to reform our ways. The people face lots of enemies but their greatest enemy was within their heart. The last books of the OT history do not conclude riding off into the sunset with a happy ending. Our battle with sin continues to the very end.

Our hearts are the most important temple. God dwells with us in a much more personal and intimate way now by dwelling in our hearts by His Holy Spirit. Don't neglect repairing and rebuilding through repentance, Scripture, prayer and worship. God has created and called His people to be worshipers and He sovereignly works His purposes to that end.