

SESSION #48

EZRA

There are three remaining books of history which we haven't covered yet. The first one is Ezra.

1. Context

The stories of the kings and the record of the Chronicles tell us that the people of God had fallen into grievous sin and God had to judge them because of it. Sin was the cause; the result was captivity. God moved His people out of the Promised Land temporarily so that they could be judged in Babylonia. After 70 years, as we saw in Jeremiah and Daniel, the people would be restored once again to their own Land.

This chart will orient you to the timeline of the final years of the OT. The blue lines with dates at the top will give you the timings. Along the bottom you'll see where the various Persian rulers fit in. The books of Ezra, Esther and Nehemiah are shown along with the remaining three prophets.

Ezra is a key figure in this restoration process. On the chart you will see that there are three sets of "returns" just as there had been three sets of "captivities". Zerubbabel leads the first returnees. Ezra leads the second, and Nehemiah leads the third.

Ezra himself was a priest and a scribe who ministered to the captives in Babylonia. Then in 458 B.C. he leads a second group of people back to the land of Canaan and the city of Jerusalem.

As these three groups return to the land over a period of a few years, we clearly see that God is doing something very significant in restoring His people back to their home.

A **relocation** is involved as the returnees pull up roots in Babylonia (now Persia) and set up life again in Canaan.

Secondly, as they do so...and Ezra especially shows us this reality...there will be a **revival of true worship** of Jehovah God.

And the people who take up the role of leadership in the nation from this time onward are not “kings” – the people of Israel never have a king again, at least not one of their own choice; King Herod in the NT was a puppet of the Roman Empire, not an Israelite king. They have learned at least this one lesson: the idea of having kings was not such a good idea after all, as Samuel had warned them hundreds of years earlier.

So, who will take the leadership role in the nation? It will be the priests who now come into a different role. Oh yes, they are still religious leaders who lead the people in worship, but they also have a political role. And that political role develops in the next few hundred years, through the period between the OT and the NT.

When you get to the book of Matthew, priests in the first century A.D. obviously have very strong political power within the nation. This power is rooted back in the time of Ezra.

A third reason for the return to the Land was to **renew** the Messianic promises. After all, the Messiah was prophesied by Micah to be born in Bethlehem, not in Babylon. He was to be crucified on Calvary, not in Chaldea. So, the whole nation has to get out of captivity and back to the Land again where God’s promises have always focussed.

2. Message and Purpose

The message in the book of Ezra centers especially on the Scriptures, renewing and reviving people’s interest in the Word of God. That was the burning passion of Ezra’s heart. He was a priest who knew the Word of God and loved the Word of God, and wanted God’s people to know it and love it like he did. His whole ministry was precisely this: renew their interest in the Scriptures and help them through the Scriptures to know and love God.

That’s why Ezra is most likely the person who wrote 1 & 2 Chronicles, looking back at the history of the kingdoms of Judah and Israel from a priestly perspective. He is probably the one who also wrote Psalm 119, that long psalm in which every verse says something about the Word of God. We don’t know for sure, but Ezra is certainly a good candidate for this authorship.

3. Structure

The book of Ezra has a rather peculiar structure. It is in two parts but the first part doesn't even focus on Ezra. It goes back to the **restoration** under Zerubbabel. So, the record of the first 6 chapters pre-dates Ezra's return to the Land, by telling us what happened when Zerubbabel led a group of 50,000 people out of captivity in Babylonia and into their own land once again. He has an unusual name but it might be easy to remember. As someone has suggested, he led these returnees back so that they could "zee ze rubble". And in truth, when they got back to Jerusalem, that's all there was: rubble everywhere!

The descriptions in chapters 1 and 2 have to do with the long journey of five months. Then chapters 3 through 6 tell us about the work. And what was the work?

The number one priority for this first group returning to the Land was to rebuild the temple. They had learned some lessons in the 70 years of captivity. And now they knew that the most important thing was to put God first in their national and personal lives. Therefore, rebuilding the temple was the top priority. And under Zerubbabel they get it done.

In the book of Ezra, there is now a 60-year interval between the first part of the book and the second part, as you see on the chart. During that interval, the story of Esther takes place, which we will get to in Session 51.

Following that interval, Ezra leads a second group of Jews back to Jerusalem from Babylon, bringing us to the second section of the book, **Reforms of Ezra**. This story is picked up in chapter 7 as Ezra describes what he himself experienced, once again focussing on the journey and then the work to be done. And what was that work? Well, it wouldn't be building the temple because that had been Zerubbabel's job.

Ezra's task then was to re-establish worship of God in that temple. Chapter 7 verse 10 tells us, "*For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel.*" It would be difficult to find anyone better suited to lead the nation in re-establishing worship than Ezra.

His reforms also deal with some problems, particularly intermarriage of many Jewish men with pagan wives. In doing so, Ezra helps the returnees become not only a worshipping people but people with hearts that are different than the generation that went into captivity.

4. Application

Prior to the captivity, God's people had gone away from God to such an extent that He had to discipline them by removing them from their land and taking them to Babylonia. Now, with changed hearts, they are ready to return both physically and spiritually to where they should be.

Ezra's record, then, is a wonderful book on how God deals with backsliders. When God's people of any time, any place, at any age back away from obedience to Him and fall into sin becoming captive to old habits and old sins, how can we be restored? Where do we start? Ezra can help us understand the steps or stages involved as spiritual principles derived from the history of God's physical people of Israel.

Their first step was to return to the Promised Land because they were a physical nation under God. For us, the principle is to return to God. Repentance toward God and faith toward Jesus Christ in obedience to Him. That is a necessary first stage after we have gone away from Him to any degree.

The next step is to rebuild an "altar" to God, a re-dedication or re-consecration to Him as our Lord and Savior, making Him the #1 priority in our lives.

The third step is to restore the "temple". In other words, we return to a life of worship, service and witness.

Fourthly, we must recognize that these steps will not be easy. In the realities of life, there will be difficulties along the way because the enemy of our souls does not want us to have a restored relationship with God, walking in fellowship with Him and living out His life in our lives.

The evil one will attack us just as he did in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. So, we need to be prepared to face problems and be aware that there will be disappointments. The story of Ezra is clear about this too.

Fifthly, recall God's Word. God does something to encourage His people. He did this with Ezra's group by raising up two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, who bring God's word in fresh ways to God's people at a time when they needed it most. (We will come to them in the next two sessions.) In our own spiritual journey back, we cannot over-emphasize the importance of God's word in our lives.

Step number 6: the work is completed, the temple is rebuilt, worship is re-established, and faith conquers once again. And that can happen in our lives too when we want to get back into fellowship with God, by moving from a place of disobedience back into a place of obedience. The book of Ezra shows us that this is something on God's own heart.

We see a memorable picture of this in Jeremiah's book, chapter 18. God sent Jeremiah down to a potter's workshop where he watched the potter work with some clay on the wheel. As the potter tried to fashion a vessel out of that clay his fingers encountered a resisting lump in the clay, and the whole partly-formed vessel shattered. Jeremiah watched as the potter stopped the wheel, picked up all the pieces of scattered clay, and began to reform the lump of clay into another vessel. And by means of this illustration, God told Jeremiah that He would work with His resistant people again, just like this potter. He is the God of the second chance. It's the same message conveyed by Ezra.

You and I have those resistant times in our lives with God too, when He wants to work with us like a potter and we resist Him. In that resistance we shatter the purpose God has for us. But He clearly shows us that this is not the end of His work in us. He doesn't give up on us any more than He gave up on the people of Israel. Ezra's whole story shows us that God loves His people and will continue to work with His people. And He will reshape us again on that wheel to make a vessel which He can use if we will just come back to Him.

Use these steps outlined in the book of Ezra, and get rid of that spiritual resistance to the Potter. He wants to make something wonderful out of our lives!

As I mentioned earlier, our next session will deal with the encouraging message of Haggai.
