

**Key Passage: Ezra 9:8-9**

Key Thought: God brings his exiles back to Jerusalem and moves them to rebuild the temple and the walls.¹

The gospel in Ezra:

When Cyrus, King of Persia, allowed God's people to return home, they came home in waves. Ezra, the scribe for whom the book of Ezra is named, does not return home until a later wave; in fact, he does not appear until chapter 7 of the book! Is the book mis-named? We are usually told that Ezra rebuilds the temple, and Nehemiah rebuilds the walls. There is truth in that, if we have eyes to see it. But the truth may not be what we expected.

For example, the physical temple was rebuilt before Ezra even appears on the scene. The edict of Cyrus declared the right to return home to build the house of the Lord, and even spoke of offered assistance of silver, gold, goods, beasts, and offerings (Ezra

¹ Note, key passages, key thoughts, and hook questions come from Michael Williams, *How to Read the Bible through the Jesus Lens*. These notes are compiled from 4 principal sources. In addition to Michael Williams book, notes are also derived from Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Old Testament in Seven Sentences*, Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament*, and H. H. Drake Williams, *Making Sense of the Bible*.

1:1-4). This sounds wonderful, and the way the edict extols the Lord is remarkable. But we must remember that the people did not return to start their own independent nation-state. Instead, they form “simply a tiny community within one corner of one of the provinces of the Persian Empire.”²

People returned home to their own villages (2:1). This included priests, Levites, and temple servants, such as male and female singers (2:36-53, 65, 70). Heads of households gave as they were able, and thus they had money to build a temple and to clothe the priests (2:68-69).

They were careful to do everything according to the statutes of the Lord. For example, some returned home claiming to belong to the class given instruction to serve as priests; but since they could not prove their lineage, they were excluded from that role (2:62-63). In addition, they started with erecting the altar to offer burnt sacrifices as prescribed—the right way, at the right time, by the right people (3:1-5). They then collected more free will offerings to enable masons and carpenters and other skilled laborers to get the right materials to build the temple (3:6-7). They appointed Levites to oversee the work (3:8-9). Once the foundations of the temple were laid, the priests appeared in their vestments, the Levite singers gathered with trumpets and cymbals, and they praised the Lord in a give-and-take responsive song, according to the directions of David, king of Israel (3:10-11). The people cheered and wept all mixed together, and the sound was so great it could be heard far away (3:12-13).

Their building project faced opposition—from the outside. People who opposed Judah didn’t want the temple rebuilt; so they made discouraging threats and even bribed counselors and sent accusatory letters to the powers that be which ended in a decree from the King to stop rebuilding until told they could do so (chapter 4).

But spurred on by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, Zerubbabel and Jeshua determined to finish the building of the temple regardless. They were questioned about it by a local governor, but they kept right on building, even while letters were sent to see if the King allowed this, if the King could find proof of the edict of Cyrus allowing this, or if the King would reprimand them once more (chapter 5).

King Darius did search the royal records; and he did find the edict. So he sent a letter back saying “leave them alone. Let this be built. Pay them whatever they need. Give them whatever else they need (bulls, rams, wheat, oil, etc)” (6:1-10). And just for good measure, the King added this: “If anyone alters this edict, a beam shall be pulled out of his house, and he shall be impaled on it, and his house shall be made a dunghill” (6:11).

² Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Old Testament in Seven Sentences*, p. 135.

On that happy note (!), the temple was finished, urged on by the encouraging support and preaching of Haggai and Zechariah (6:13-15). And the people celebrated the dedication of the Temple once more (6:16-17). And they set in place all the right people in all the right places, as it is written in the book of Moses (6:18).

The book of Ezra adds a note at the end of chapter 6. The people kept the Passover—not only Israelites, but also “every one who had joined them and separated himself from the uncleanness of the peoples of the land to worship the Lord, the God of Israel” (6:21). God has turned the heart of even the king of Assyria to aid them (6:22)! And the text says “the Lord had made them joyful” (6:22).

We see the gospel before Ezra enters the scene. We see the glory of what planned, purposed, and promised—the glory days of the early Kings—the days the Chronicler retold in a hopeful way to returning exiles, serve as a backdrop to willing people who wish to fulfill the will of the Lord. We see God keeping his promise, and a people called by God himself willing to be the hands and feet of the Lord. Yet God is given all credit and glory, as the text over and over says “God stirred up” the people, or kings. God provided at every turn. There is no reason to fear rulers or powers that be when God, the Lord, is on your side. We see the people careful to keep the commands of the Lord—as we should. But the rest of the book is going to add another dimension to this: that obeying the Lord is and always has been a matter of the heart, even more than the hands. And keeping all the right procedures was always for an intended purpose, one that should never be misunderstood for the outward expressions.

Ezra shows up in a later wave. We are told some things about him of note. First, he is called a “scribe” (7:6). We will see scribes in the gospels, but Ezra seems to be the first with this title. A scribe is “skilled in the law of Moses.” He was also a priest (7:12), so this is a role that didn’t apply to all priests. Second, “the good hand of his God was on him” (7:6, 9). Third, “he had set his heart to study the Law of the Lord, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel” (7:10). Notice this is not simply “the law of Moses;” this is “the law of the Lord” or as verse 12 puts it, “the law of the God of heaven.” The last thing I want to note is that Ezra comes to a temple already built. Yet more money is offered. So what is Ezra come to do? He comes to teach of course, but also to “beautify the house of the Lord that is in Jerusalem” (7:27).

In chapters 8-9, Ezra does some interesting things. He gathered the leaders and checks the records; he finds no sons of Levi, so he goes about correcting this (7:15-20). He also fasted and prayed for a safe journey. He considered arming the people and/or getting some armed guards and bouncers to lead the way, but he was embarrassed to do so, since he had told the King that they had nothing to fear since God was with them (7:21-23).

Ezra also comes to realize that the people had not completely separated themselves from the people, habits, and customs of the nations around them. The main way in which they had failed to completely sever ties is that they had intermarried with people who worshipped other gods. This is not a passage suggesting any problem with interracial marriage today; instead, this is about disobeying the command of the Lord concerning holiness. Moses and Joshua had warned them about this (Ex 34:16; Deut 7:3-4; Josh 23:12-13).

There are a number of interesting things we could consider in these chapters, but I want to emphasize where I see the gospel being played out. So here are three things to notice in the closing chapters of the book.

First, notice the emphasis on the real temple. This is why the book is well named. The first 6 chapters was rebuilding a physical building. But God was never meant to be contained in a building made with human hands. And the real temple—the real visible place where the glory of God would be seen by the world—was always meant to be in his people, not in a building. So the second half of the book is Ezra helping rebuilt the real temple—namely, the spiritual worship of spiritual hearts. Here is how Michael Williams tells it.

Here is how Ephesians puts it (see Eph 2:19-22)

Second, in keeping with this emphasis on the real, spiritual temple, notice how Ezra tells the story with an emphasis on God and his mercy, not the people's righteousness.

Finally, notice how the people hear of their wrongdoing, confess their sins, and take drastic action. If this was a class on Ezra, or on marriage, I'd want to spend time assuring you that breaking up your home today is probably not the first option I or the elders here would recommend. In fact, we will learn from Nehemiah that his recommendation is not to break up marriages, but to make sure you teach your kids to not repeat the same mistake. But remember this is not about a hard marriage, or even a marriage to an unbeliever; it's about the specific commands of God for a particular people under a covenant where he wanted to teach a lesson to the entire world about holiness as separation. They wanted God to be glorified, no matter what the consequences. That kind of heart reminds us of the gospel call in the New Testament—those who value father and mother and houses and lands more than me are not worthy of me! And that when God demands everything you have, or the things you hold most dear, will you give him what he asks for?

Hook Questions:³

1. What are you building with your life? Are your efforts focused on God's kingdom or on your own? Are you aware that building of some sort is always going on? Wouldn't it be better to expend your efforts on something that lasts? What are the tools that God has given you to participate in the building process?
2. What kind of life does this building demand? Have you committed yourself to something that is draining the life from you? Are you happy with how you've spent your years? Why not commit yourself to something that infuses you with life?

³ Taken from Michael Williams, *How to Read the Bible through the Jesus Lens*, p.60, 64.