

(slide of map of Persian Empire) Lesson 24: Reforms Under Ezra

Last week we learned some of the history and background of the first return of the exiles from Persia to their homeland in Israel. We learned among other things that the Lord is very willing to use people other than His chosen ones to accomplish His will. We saw that God used King Cyrus of Persia shortly after he conquered Babylon in 539 BC to orchestrate the first return of the Jews exiled in what had just become part of the Persian Empire. (map of Judah during exile)

There were enormous problems facing those who returned. Those who had remained in Judah during the exile had taken over the land and now considered it theirs. They were resentful of the newcomers who returned and wanted to reclaim ancestral land. Many of those who remained, especially those in Samaria, saw themselves as the true heirs of the promises, and wanted to be part of the restoration process, as we studied last week. When their request was soundly rejected, they retaliated with intimidation and threats which caused trouble with the authorities. The other surrounding kingdoms saw the exiles' return as a new threat to their own local control of the area. Throughout the next century, the returned Israelites would be harassed by local tribes who did not want to have the walled city of Jerusalem rebuilt in their territory.

There were also the religious problems that came from what looked like failed promises. While the Jews had been allowed to return home as the prophets had spoken, there was economic hardship, drought and famine. But with the encouragement of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, a second Temple was

completed and dedicated in 515 BC seventy years after the destruction of the first one. We left the people in our lesson last week celebrating their first Passover and filled with joy that there was a center of religious life once more in their Promised Land. (chart of Persian Kings of the Exile)

This chart shows the events of the time period which we studied these last two weeks: explain the section which is between Ezra 6 and 7.

Zerubbabel, who led the first group of captives back to Jerusalem, was a descendant of King David, and his name is listed in the genealogy of Jesus in both

the books of Matthew and Luke. However, once the temple was built, his work was done and Zerubbabel simply disappeared from the history books. We do not know what happened to him, but some scholars have speculated that there was talk of making him a new king, so the Persians most likely removed him. Persia was tolerant with their conquered people, but Israel had a reputation, you know, and they could not risk a new rival Kingdom in Judah.

Between Darius in chapter 4-6 and chapter 7 which we studied this week, was the rule of Xerxes and the Persian Wars against Greece. It was a time of silence from the prophets, and the Biblical narrative shifted back to Persia and the Book of Esther which we will study in lessons 30 and 31. During this time, the land of Israel declined into about 60 years of economic and spiritual stagnation. They needed a revival; so God sent them Ezra. To win the good will of the people, in 458 BC, Artaxerxes authorized the Jewish priest Ezra, to lead a new delegation of Jews back to their homeland.

Our study this week opens in chapter 7 where we note in the first 6 verses that Ezra was descended from the priestly line of Aaron. His ancestor was Phinehas, whose story is told in chapter 25 of Numbers during a time when God was angry with the sexual immorality of the Israelite men with the Moabite women. Phinehas had risen up and speared to death an offending man and woman thereby putting a stop to a deadly plague that threatened to wipe out the Israelites before they reached the Promised Land. The timing of Phinehas's deed had been essential to the saving the entire race.

(slide of Artaxerxes granting liberty to the Jews)

So when Artaxerxes, the king of Persia, chose someone for the job of restoring the hearts of the people of Israel, he picked the right man for the job. He chose a man who knew Jewish law and history and who had been born and raised in Babylon. Ezra, having lived in captivity would appreciate his newly granted freedom and would be loyal to Persian rule. Ezra had carefully researched and written the book of Chronicles and had meticulously recorded the people and events with the first group of exiles, so Artaxerxes knew Ezra could be trusted to carefully document the next venture.

In chapter 7, verse 6, we read that the king granted Ezra everything that Ezra wanted. He made an attractive offer to a new group of exiles, since few would be

eager to make the four month journey to settle in a land which none of them had known as home. So he granted Ezra provisions for the journey, a generous contribution from his treasury to beautify their temple, and the resources to pay for their sacrificial offerings. He hoped to please the God of Jerusalem, but it was primarily a smart political move for the king. By sending the Jewish people with a generous gift, the king was buying the people's loyalty, making them less likely to rebel. But from Ezra's point of view, it was the hand of the Lord on God's people.
(slide: Ezra's journey)

Purpose of Ezra's Journey: The purpose of Ezra's journey was to restore some semblance of Jewish law to the exiles who were in both economic and spiritual decline. In chapter 7: 14-26, Artaxerxes commanded, 'You, Ezra are to teach all who do not know the law and to administer justice in the land. Whoever does not obey the law of your God will be punished by death, banishment, confiscation of property, or imprisonment.'

Preparation: It was a pretty hefty assignment with a great deal of authority and certainly would not have been delegated to a rookie. God had been working behind the scenes to prepare Ezra for such a time as this. (slide: character of Ezra)

No one naturally gravitates to the things of God. One must be deliberate in his or her efforts to follow the ways of the Lord. Ezra deliberately set his heart to do three things:

He was a diligent student of God's Word. He was a passionate prayer warrior; he was obedient in following the Law of Moses and was a respected teacher. Such characteristics made him the perfect candidate for a most important position in God's and King Artaxerxes's work force. Ezra lived a Godly lifestyle in a foreign land, under a pagan leadership, and yet lived out a powerful witness to those around him, so much so that he was appointed by the king for a Godly role and paid handsomely to carry it out!

God uses men who have prepared themselves and desire to be used by Him. Could it be that God is preparing you for the next step in your life? If so, use Ezra as a role model. He was prepared and ready to accept a big responsibility, in God's perfect timing. Are you preparing for the next step by diligent study, prayer

and obedience? If so, when God needs someone to step in, chances are that He will find you a faithful servant ready to do His will.

(map of exile route) In chapter 8, the journey began. It was probably not easy to recruit people to make the trip to Israel. The several hundred mile journey would take four months over difficult terrain, but Ezra was able to persuade a few thousand to go. After carefully recording their names, Ezra realized that he had no Levites among the group. (slide of Ahava) The Levites in exile did not have follow strict rules of temple service, and convincing them to move to Jerusalem where they would have to live a disciplined life in service to the people would have been difficult indeed. That he was able to recruit 38 Levites and 220 temple servants is a credit to his reputation and again to God's favor. Without the Levites to teach and minister in the temple, the very purpose for establishing a place of worship in Israel would have been lost permanently.

(slide of Ezra 8:21) Ezra gathered the people to pray and fast for protection on the journey, especially needed since they did not have any military protection and with all the wealth they were carrying, they were particularly vulnerable. Prayer and fasting before a journey.....Have you ever done this before a trip, even a short one? Praying before you get into the car is one way that we can place our safety firmly in God's hands, knowing full well how vulnerable we are on the streets and highways of our land. Most car accidents occur within 25 miles of our homes. Make sure you're prayed up when you get in the car.

Provision: Ezra carefully assigned twelve priests the responsibility of the temple treasures and relied upon the Lord for their safe arrival in Jerusalem. Once there, they turned everything over to the temple officials and most likely Ezra sent an accounting of the treasures back to the king. God's hand of protection on the new arrivals so impressed the royal officials living in the area that they contributed their own money to help the returning exiles offer sacrifices to the Lord.

By the time we come to Chapter 9: Ezra had been teaching for four months. He was a diligent role model of obedience to the law. He restored temple worship to its proper format and his teaching ministry began to bear fruit. The people came to him to confess that they had broken the Law of Moses regarding marriage with those who lived in the land.

In Exodus 34 and in Deuteronomy 7, God had told them if they married daughters of the Canaanites, Hittites and the other “ites” in the land, that those daughters would lead their sons astray and turn their hearts toward other gods. The Law of Moses was clear: “Do not intermarry with them”. The concern that God's people not intermarry is not about the nature of marriage, (slide of Unequal Yoke) for an unequal yoke is a symptom of a greater problem and it is this: When God's people disobey in the most intimate of human relationships, then they are more likely to compromise on other issues also. But Ezra was more concerned with the root of the problem: idolatry. Ezra looked into the future and saw the Ashtoreth poles, the altars in high places, the child sacrifice, the temple prostitution, the siege of the city, the wars, the dispersion of the Jews into other lands again and again and he said, “NO!”

(slide of Deuteronomy 7)

This lesson is about the restoration of a people who were going astray in the same way that Solomon had led many years before. The concern was not so much about not intermarrying with the other peoples, but it had to do with loyalty to the covenant God had made with the children of Israel. The issue was holiness, loyalty to God Himself in belief and practice, and a willingness to reject idolatry. The problem was with parents! In the ancient world, parents arranged marriages for their children often using them to make deals with members of surrounding peoples for their own economic benefit, perhaps for political advantage. Certainly King Solomon married many wives for this reason. Parents were arranging marriages for their children in order to form alliances which usually opened the door to the worship of other gods. This was a matter in which Israel had failed so often in the past, and now they were beginning once again to invite the influence of idols. It was the same sin that drove them into exile and now in less than two generations, it was happening again.

For Ezra, the announcement of the sin should have been a victory; because of his teaching, the people acknowledged their sin and came forward to expose it. But he was despondent over the fact that his teaching had had a most worthy effect. He looked down the line and saw the long-term ramifications. All of God's provision and orchestration of events to bring His people back into the land was going to be worthless if the people intermarried now with the Gentiles in the land. In one or two generations, all would be as it was before the captivity. Ezra's response was to fall silent and lament for several hours without words. He tore his cloak in anguish, pulled his hair from his head

and beard in the cultural fashion of self-mutilation. In the way of the priest, Ezra became the sin for his people, much like Jesus our high priest would do for them and us on the cross four hundred years later. The people, trembling with fear, gathered around him and waited. Ezra fell on his knees, spread out his arms and poured out his heart.

Read verse 9:6 “O my God, I am too ashamed and disgraced to lift up my face to You, my God because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens.”

He remembered and recorded every word of that prayer for our benefit to use as a model for our own prayers of confession.

Here is what that model looks like: (slide of Ezra’s prayer)

1. Acknowledge guilt.
2. State what God has done for us.
3. Name the sin and its logical consequences.

This is important because we know what we will face if we do not repent.

4. Agree that we deserve punishment from a righteous God
5. Plead the blood of Jesus for undeserved mercy.

When confronted with challenges, the most powerful thing we can do is pray: pour out our hearts before him, receive what He will give us, depend on Him rather than try to make things happen. You know this, but do we really pray like that? Pretty rarely, I’m fairly sure of it. Our prayers are very sanitized, we say nice words, we rarely confess our guilt, because if we are honest, we don’t really think we’re that bad. We often don’t see our sin, our apathy, our compromising, our comforts for what they can be down the line. We’ve gotten sucked in by the culture; we don’t really need to be that emotional.....do we? Why would this prayer be here if not for us to apply it to our lives? Why would this sin be here if not to apply to our lives?

(slide of Idolatry today) Let’s think about idolatry in the context of our own culture; what things replace loyalty to the Lord for us today? Our God is a jealous God who calls us to put Him first so that He can bless us and when He blesses us with these things, they often become a snare to us. Family, kids, grandkids,

reputation, success, sex, retirement accounts, education, sports, entertainment, our love affair with food, comfortable living, good deeds, who of us has not placed at least one of these ahead of God at some time in our lives? Perhaps even now, you are dealing with setting your affections on something else more than the Lord. The amount of attention we give to any of these can draw us into little compromises that over time will change our hearts usually to our shame. Is it really your desire to honor the Lord, to give Him all that you have within you to praise Him? Or do you make compromises with time and attention devoted to other things because it is perfectly acceptable in our culture today. You see, it was acceptable for the Israelites to intermarry with others living nearby, just as it is acceptable in our culture to tolerate homosexuality, abortions, a little bit of corruption in our leaders, to laugh at sexual sin, to give ourselves a few indulgences in luxury when people in the world need food and shelter. The religion of the world has saturated our culture and has interjected its concepts into the lives of God's people so effectively that there is often little difference between the world and us. Are we really so confident that we are not living a life of idolatry? Do we need to be restored from an idol in our lives?

Ezra's prayer is a remarkable prayer. And, it had immediate results! Powerful results! (slide of Ezra 10:1) As Ezra continued to pray and weep and throw himself on the ground, the large crowd of Israelites saw their sin for what it was and began weeping bitterly also. God moved in the hearts of the people. There was no making of excuses, no blaming, no compromise. The people confessed their sin, agreed that what the Law said was true. They were unified in their response that they were ready to begin the process of restoration. They realized that it might not be too late if they actually separated themselves from these ungodly wives along with their children right at that point. There weren't prophets of Baal or Ashtoreth on every hill or widespread practice of the twisted Canaanite religion with all its perversion and violence.....yet, but they were as guilty in their sin at that point as they would be if it continued unchecked.

Jesus would later teach, "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away;... If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off. The people did not say, "Let us hold on to what we have and from here on out, we will not marry foreign women." In chapter 10:4 they said, "Let it be done

according to the Law. Rise up, the matter is in your hands. We will support you, so take courage, and do it.” They gave Ezra permission to be ruthless with them. And he was. (slide of the Verdict) A proclamation was issued, and in three days, during the spring rains, the people sat in the open square of the house of God, trembling with fear and discouragement. The verdict was announced and the people agreed to separate from their wives and children. Ezra held the assembly accountable to do what they agreed to do by making them take a vow.

(Slide of restoration) Restoration was painful. Restoration often requires separating ourselves from precious elements of our past, even if they appear to be good and right in the eyes of the times or culture, in favor of what is right in God’s eyes. The whole process took weeks, because many men had taken pagan wives. The leaders examined each marriage to see if any of these wives had genuinely decided to serve the Lord God and to forsake her native religion. Fortunately, most of the foreign wives had joined the people of God in their heart as well as their home. If the pagan wife had decided to keep her primary allegiance with her former people and their idols, she could not live among the covenant community and had to be divorced. While divorce is always hateful to God, the situation in the Book of Ezra is a classic example of one in which the lesser of two evils had to be chosen. If a serious reason for divorce could ever exist, this was one of them. Marriages with idolatrous and heathen women, being expressly and severely forbidden by God, were one undesirable, yet acceptable, reason for divorce. This was the harsh reality of the sin, because not only would the wives be sent away, but also the children. It was understood by the ancient culture, the women would stay with their children, and the law of God would have required that each of them received a portion of their husband’s income according to the circumstances so that they and their children would not become destitute. (Slide of Exodus 20) However, it is a sad reality that children do suffer for their parents’ sins down to the third and fourth generation, according to Exodus 20:6.

It would have been nice if the Book of Ezra had a happy conclusion, but it ends right here with a listing of over 100 men whose wives refused to embrace the God of Israel and had to be divorced. It was an embarrassing way to get one’s name recorded in the bestselling book of all time! We’ll meet Ezra again in the Book of Nehemiah where his passion restores the fickle people of the God once again. Conclusion and application:

Ezra was a unique role model for his people and for us. Here are four ways that we can grow as Godly men and women based on his example:

(slides: applications)

1. Start preparing now for your next assignment from God with diligent prayer, study of God's Word, and obedience.
2. Pray for safety before a journey, even a short one.
3. Recognize and confess idolatry and compromise with the culture in our lives.
4. Be willing to separate ourselves permanently from areas of compromise in order to be restored.

By following Ezra as a role model, we too can be Godly role models whom God can use to build faith in others and so live out our calling as His chosen people.

Thank you, Lord for instructing us through Ezra's example of a Godly role model in his prayer life, his study of the Word of God, and of his obedience. I ask that we would be People not only of the Word, but also of prayer, who clearly have our priorities dedicated to being loyal to You. Help us to see the necessity of reliance upon you and upon your Spirit to convict us in areas of compromise. Help us to not only be people who know Your Word, but to be people who live it out each minute of our day, so that we may stand firm against compromise in our culture and serve out a unique role in Your kingdom here on earth.