

The Book of Ezra

Part 1

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[00:00:00] ...to the people of God in his day. His story is described in the last four chapters of the book, chapters 7 to 10. But my exercise for this evening is to focus on the first six chapters, especially the first three, and see whether Ezra can be a help to us, whether the book of Ezra can be a help to 21st century Christians who live in a world where, as our brother Mark said this afternoon, there's a chilly wind coming straight in our faces, and the spirit of the age is much against us. But I would suggest that we can draw many applications from this book of Ezra. That help us, and that can encourage us to follow the Word, to follow the way which we find described in the New Testament [00:01:06] for believers today.

You notice right in the first verse that something was wrong.

Because it says now in the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia. If you read through the Old Testament, and you came to the books of Kings and Chronicles, you would find that it says, and it happened in this and that year of King so-and-so of Judah, or of Israel. But now it suddenly says, and it happened in the first year of King Cyrus, king of Persia. And it strikes you immediately that something must have changed. God had taken his throne from Jerusalem.

One Chronicle 36, I think it is, which says that Solomon sat on that throne of God in Jerusalem. And God moved the throne away from Jerusalem and [00:02:05] gave authority to the nation. And when the Lord was here, he spoke about that time of the nation. That Israel would be trodden underfoot until the time of the nation, Luke 21, would be completed. What had happened?

You can take the picture of a landlord and a tenant.

A landlord would put up with quite something a tenant might do. Perhaps some loud music, perhaps every now and then a party, and perhaps some damage to the property. But there may be a point reached where the landlord says, now it's too bad.

Now, I don't even want your rent. I don't want anything. I just want you to go and to leave my property. [00:03:01] And that's exactly what happened. God said to Israel, you've been occupying my land for long enough now, and the kind of idolatry you've got involved in has become so bad that I want you to vacate the property, so to speak.

And we read about this king who came, Nebuchadnezzar, and who led some of the people away and even took some of the vessels.

That was a very dark period that started then. Seventy years in Babylon. Seventy years without an altar.

Seventy years without sacrifices. And how do you think a Christian would feel without worship? But there they were. Because of their past history, because of their faults and the faults of their fathers, God had to lead them into this captivity. But the book of Ezra [00:04:05] really shows us a new start. And it's interesting to see how it happens. God really prepares the way. This person here with whom it starts, Cyrus, king of Persia, is quite an interesting character. He's known in secular history as the founder of the Medo-Persian Empire.

He conquered the Babylonian Empire. He was renowned for his humane policies. The ultimate objective of his policies was to bring peace to mankind.

And the way he treated the subjects he had conquered was very humane. And this is how it would be explained in secular history [00:05:01] that this king Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to their country. But the Bible reader, of course, can look a bit deeper than that. You can turn to Isaiah 44, as we just looked it up, because it's very interesting that perhaps hundred years, or even a bit more, before the time of king Cyrus, the prophet Isaiah spoke about him. And he even mentioned him by name. If you look at Isaiah 44, the last verse, He that saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform my pleasure. Even saying to Jerusalem, thou shalt be built, and to the temple thy foundation shall be laid.

And you can read on the first five verses of the next chapter, and you find that [00:06:05] Isaiah predicted that this king should allow the people to return and build the temple. Now, if you have the day off, and want to go to the British Museum, you can find a clay cylinder there with the decree passed by king Cyrus, and it has been hailed as the first charter of human rights.

And people will find that very interesting. But to the Bible reader, what is more interesting is that God not only made Isaiah prophesy about this man, but God stirred up his spirit. I'm quite sure that this king had access to Isaiah's prophecy, and he must have been deeply impressed that God should have spoken about him in such detail, [00:07:02] such a long time beforehand. And that's why he says in verse 2, God has given to me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me. So he was conscious that it was a direct command from God to allow the Jews to return and build that temple. And he then passes this decree, and verse 3 gives us the essence of it.

Who is there among you of all his people? His God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

Now again, I'm thankful we had a little bit of introduction to this this afternoon. What is the significance of going from Babylon to Jerusalem?

I would suggest to you that in the Bible, the place speaks of a set of principles. [00:08:06] No doubt you will agree that Eden speaks of paradise. We mentioned Sodom already, which speaks of moral corruption and depravity. Egypt speaks of the world and its power.

Canaan speaks of the heavenly land.

Now what about Babylon?

You go back to Genesis 11 and combine it with prophecies in Zechariah, you find that Babylon stands for two things. One is confusion, and the other is idolatry. And this is where the people have been for those 70 years. Now what's involved in going back to Jerusalem? Jerusalem, of course, according to Deuteronomy 12, was a special place. [00:09:02] It was the place which God had chosen for his people. Now that's the choice. On the one hand, Babylon. On the other hand, Jerusalem.

On the one hand, the general flow, but confusion. And on the other hand, a place that is of God's liking. A place where God says, this is the place for you to dwell. And on the other hand, a place that is of God's liking. A place where God says, this is exactly how I want it to be. And in that sense, I would suggest to you that King Cyrus is still alive today. Because that decree is still there.

And that call still goes out, who is there among you? It's really a personal appeal.

It takes a conscious decision. [00:10:01] You might prefer staying in Babylon. You know, many would have been brought up there after 70 years. It would be very few who remember the time when they went there. It was a big step to take. And yet the call is there, who is there among you to go up? And the call today is, who is there among you who wants to return to a set of fundamental principles that perhaps have been forgotten for 70 years or longer? A set of principles that were there from the beginning. And a set of principles that are really, according to God's mind, the place which God has chosen.

Now interestingly, God not only raised up the spirit of King Cyrus, his work extended to the people. [00:11:01] And if there was a response among the people, it wasn't because they were so good, but it was because God raised up, as it says in verse 5, the spirit of those out of Judah and Benjamin who went up. And may God still raise up spirits today to take that conscious decision to follow those principles which are according to God's mind and work.

Now verse 7 mentions in particular the vessels.

It says, also Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of the Lord which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of Jerusalem and had put them into the house of his guards.

Now why are the vessels so important? If you follow the history in the books of kings and chroniclers, [00:12:03] you find that, as a matter of fact, there were three deportations, three occasions where some of the people were carried away from Israel into Babylon.

The last of those was perhaps the most cruel one.

This is when the temple was burned and this is when the largest number of people were led away. But the 70 years of captivity are not counted from that last deportation. The first was under King Jehoiakim and then King Zedekiah.

And the 70 years do not count from Zedekiah, but from the first, Jehoiakim, which is when Nebuchadnezzar died. And why is it that the captivity began at that time?

[00:13:04] Well, because something happened which was a real disaster for the people.

Nebuchadnezzar took the vessels out of the temple, he took them with him to Babylon, and he put

them into the temple of his idols. Now that had never happened before.

People had tampered with the silver and gold of the temple. When the king of Assyria came, King Ahaz, and Hezekiah as well, they took silver out of the temple, even broke off some silver from the doors, from the gates, but never ever had anyone taken the vessels and given those away. Because if you give the vessels away, what happens? Well, you can't worship. [00:14:03] And that's essentially what had happened. Worship was lost, and this is when God stopped counting those 70 years.

But again, it's good to see that God is so gracious that he limited that time of captivity. We even read in the first verse that it had been prophesied by Jeremiah that the captivity would only last 70 years. And what God wants to do is work this revival, this return to first principles.

Now if we just move on quickly and look at some details in chapter 2, we find that there was this response. Chapter 2, verse 1.

Now these are the children of the province that went up out of the captivity [00:15:02] of those which had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, had carried away unto Babylon, and came again unto Jerusalem and Judah, every one unto his city.

Verse 40, or first verse 36.

The priests. Verse 40, the Levites.

Verse 41, the singers. Verse 42, the porters. Verse 43, the Nephilim.

Verse 55, the children of Solomon's servants.

And then verse 61, and of the children of the priests.

Verse 62, these sought their register among those that were reckoned by genealogy, [00:16:03] but they were not found. There were they, as polluted, put from the priesthood. And the Kshatriya said unto them that they should not eat of the most holy things till there stood up a priest with urine and thumbing. And the whole congregation together was forty and two thousand, three hundred and three scores.

Verse 68, when they came to the house of the Lord, which is at Jerusalem, they offered freely.

Verse 69, they gave after their ability.

Now this is a long chapter. Seventy verses, and you might say 95% of this is just names. [00:17:03] And most of the names are completely unknown to us. And you just wonder why does God take care to write down such a long list of names. And yet, I think it has a strong message. Just this fact that God takes account of those hearts that were stirred up. If someone follows that call to return, God takes note.

I think there was a lot that spoke against it, humanly speaking. We mentioned just custom and habit that had grown up there. You might think of comfort. It was a lot easier to stay there than to make all the way back only to get to a field of ruins and rubble. You could think of the majority argument. And

again we were reminded this afternoon that the majority is not always right. [00:18:01] But just think about it. 43,000 returned. When Israel left Egypt there were 600,000 men and families. How few.

And yet God says, well I take note of everyone who returns in that way. Some groups of people are mentioned individually. Some groups of people are mentioned individually. The priests. And I think that's important for the recovery. That the priesthood of deliverance is recovered. There are priests that people can approach God and worship. There are the Levites. And they are very important as well. It's strange though that there were so few. You might have thought there would be more Levites than priests, wouldn't you? But there were 74 Levites and over 4,000 priests. [00:19:05] But that's symptomatic perhaps of the condition you find often in God's people. That there are few who want to get involved in practical work. But it's nice to see that there were some.

There were singers as well. To give praise to God.

Porters.

Who took their responsibilities. And then you find two long passages about the Nephilim and Solomon's servants. And you might have thought, well these people are the least important. And yet God writes down all the names of their fathers. They might have been engaged in lowly service.

And yet God says, well they are important to me. As of verse 61 then, you find this incident where people came and they weren't sure. [00:20:04] Or at least they couldn't prove whether they were priests. And this sort of incident makes one point very plain.

It is something that couldn't have happened in the early days. In the early days, the priestly family was known. There wouldn't have been a question of who belongs to that family and who doesn't. A bit like in the New Testament in the Book of Acts. Nobody dared to just join himself to the Christians without being the believer himself. But now, after 70 years of captivity, of no priesthood being exercised. Suddenly you have this problem. It's one of those time of ruin problems that they couldn't tell who the priests were. Now what was to be done? One thing might have been to just pretend to be able to do what they weren't able to do.

[00:21:09] To be able to just tell. You know, the Urim and Thummim I mentioned. Why not just ask God and say we've got the answer?

But it is decided here that they shouldn't do this because at the moment that wasn't available. And that's a nice feature of this remnant. There's no pretend. They don't pretend to be able to tell. And if the evidence wasn't there, then they had a simple question to ask which was what is more important, our human feelings or the rights of God?

Now ask a humanist and he will always tell you man is more important. As long as man is happy, everything is fine. But here you've got a set of people for whom the rights of God were of primary importance.

[00:22:10] It's nice to see that there is this willingness to offer.

A lot had to be done. Sacrifices should be given soon. And it's nice to see the willingness among the people to contribute to that. Perhaps we should read some verses in chapter 3 because we find some

more very nice features which God wants to observe among his people. Let's read from 3 verse 1.

And when the seventh month was come, the children of Israel were in the city. The people gathered themselves as one man to Jerusalem. Then stood up Jeshua, the son of Josedath, and his brethren, the priests, [00:23:01] and to Reubal, the son of Shealtiel, his brethren, and builded the altar of God, of Israel. To offer burnt offerings thereon as it is written in the law of Moses, the man of God. And they set the altar upon his faces, for fear was upon them because of the people of those countries. And they offered burnt offerings thereon unto the Lord, even burnt offerings morning and evening. And they kept also the feast of tabernacles as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number according to the custom, as the duty of every day requires.

And afterwards offered the continual burnt offerings, both of the new moon and of all the set feast, of the Lord that were consecrated, and of everyone that willingly offered a freewill offering unto the Lord. [00:24:03] On the first day of the seventh month began they to offer burnt offerings unto the Lord. But the foundation of the house of the Lord was not yet laid.

You find two great things happening in this chapter. The first one is that the altar is put up, and the second one is that the foundation of the temple is laid. And I wish everyone here that he or she experiences these two things.

First one, that the altar is set up. After that long time without worship, that's what they focus on. You might have expected them to do something else. Perhaps you say, well, first you need a city wall. Check yourself. [00:25:04] And then you need houses to live in. And then you build a new temple. And when that is finished, when you start thinking about the altar, that would have been normal, wouldn't it? And instead of doing that, they start right away with the altar. And I think it's beautiful to see that priority in the life of a believer. To say, the one thing that matters to us is to be able to give some response and praise to the Lord Jesus and to the Father who has given him. We've heard of people who told us that where they used to go, there used to be worship.

And the time came when this was replaced. [00:26:02] And they started having performances, concerts, choirs, and all sorts of things which were nice in themselves. But they said, what we are really looking for is a place where we can bring worship to the Father and worship to the Son. And after all, it's the one thing the Father seeks. He seeks worshipers. And so it's nice to see that they focus on this altar. It's interesting that they come together on this significant day, the first day of the seventh month, and they gather as one man in Jerusalem.

Now why was that a significant day?

We have at least three feasts here in the first part of this chapter.

And each of them is very beautiful in the context, but also if you apply it to a believer today. [00:27:05] The first feast, which according to Numbers 29 happens on that very day, is the Feast of Trumpets. Now what was the Feast of Trumpets for? The trumpets were blown to call the people together into one place. Prophetically it speaks of a future day when that would happen to Israel. But God also wants to happen it to his people today. He wants them to return to one place.

The second feast, and we read about this a bit later on, is also quite significant.

It's the Feast of the New Moon. It's not the full moon, but it's the time when the small silver stripe appears on the horizon after the complete absence of the moon.

[00:28:05] Now the people of Israel were meant to reflect some of the glory of God. But there had been 70 years where they had not given any light. And now the time has come when some have returned, when an altar was built, and when they started to reflect again a little bit of heavenly light.

And perhaps as believers we want to ask ourselves as well, how much light have we given in our surroundings recently? Was it a bright full moon, or was it a complete absence of light? And if there was an absence, may the Lord give us this Feast of the New Moon to start giving some light again.

And we'll come to the third feast a bit later on maybe. [00:29:03] Now once they built the altar, they offered burnt offerings thereon as it was written in the Law of Moses. So they give their part to God, and they do it in the right way. And it's interesting to see the many references here which show a return to the Scriptures. If you look at verse 2, it's as it is written.

Verse 4, as it is written, according to the custom or ordinance.

And so you could go on, according to the Law of Moses, and even when worship is brought later on, it is according to the ordinances of David. And I think that's a true sign of a true revival.

There's a return to Scripture, perhaps a Scripture that has been forgotten or that has not been practised for a while. [00:30:03] An example might be verse 4, the Feast of Tabernacles.

Now what is that feast about? Remember that Israel was meant to celebrate it for a full week, to live in these huts made of fresh branches and leaves.

A picture of the future millennial joy.

But have you ever thought about where that feast should be celebrated? Think about the people of Israel in the desert, in the wilderness. And imagine you would ask them to celebrate the Feast of the Tabernacles. What would happen? Well I think they'd be in big trouble trying to find green leaves, trying to find fresh branches, and trying to build huts. How would you go about that in the wilderness? [00:31:02] It's a feast that could only be celebrated and enjoyed in the country, in Canaan.

And so it speaks to us of the fact that Christians are heavenly people. Christians have heavenly blessings. Some may want to say earthly blessings in return for faith. But we know from the New Testament that we are blessed with Christ in the heavenly places. We also have a heavenly hope. Again, that's something we forget sometimes quite easily. We can get very occupied with work and house and family and whatever there may be. But really, the Christian has a heavenly hope.

And in that sense, we can ask ourselves whether we have experienced that bit of recovery. Are we waiting for the Lord? Is there this Feast of the Tabernacles? [00:32:02] Is there an enjoyment of our heavenly position? So that's part one of chapter three. The altar set up, the sacrifices given, worship for God, and the feast celebrated and enjoyed according to God's Word.

But it ended with this phrase, But the foundation of the house of the Lord was not yet laid.

And that's exactly what happens in the second part of this chapter. And I'm sure most of you will have read this before. I'll just read two verses now. Verse 10 And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, they set the priests in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levite, the son of Asaph, with cymbals, [00:33:06] to praise the Lord after the ordinance of David, king of Israel. Verse 13 But the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of weeping of the people.

For the people shouted with a loud shout, and the noise was heard afar off. Again, they had contributed. They had given willingly so that building materials could be brought from the north, Lebanon today.

And the day had come when this foundation of the temple had been laid.

And you understand that it was a cause of joy. [00:34:02] People saw they were back in the country, they had recovered the altar, and now the foundation was there.

We could see things happening. We could see where the temple was going to be. And yet there were those who were weeping. And inevitably, you ask the question, well, who was brought? Why were some weeping?

Well, those who were weeping, they were the old ones. They were the over-70s, or if they had come with the last deportations, they were the over-50s. And they remembered what Solomon's temple had been lost. A magnificent building.

And now they look at this, just that altar, this foundation, and compared to what they had known in the past, this is just nothing. And perhaps there are some among you here who are far ahead of me in terms of years, and who can remember very bright days.

[00:35:11] Perhaps days that were like revival days compared with today. Perhaps they're inclined to say, well, what we see today is very little. Or you might even think back to Acts 2. Multitudes converted.

A powerful Christian testimony, one heart and one soul. The way they dealt with each other, just wonderful. And how are things today? Well, in a way, both were justified.

Those who wept, they knew what they were weeping about, and they appreciated the decline that had happened. But those who rejoiced, they also knew what they were rejoicing about. There had been a genuine return.

[00:36:02] And there are things which are still preserved to us today. We have the Word of God. We have the Spirit of God. We have the promise of the Lord's presence. There are old principles, fundamental principles, we can practice. And that's all it means to go back to Jerusalem. A few years later, the riddle, I think, was solved by Haggai.

When he prophesied, he said, on the one hand, what you see, is it not as nothing compared with the old days? And yet he said, be strong. It's the same house.

The latter glory of this house will be greater than the former glory.

In God's mind, Solomon's temple, and this small temple, and the glorious temple in the Millennium, it's all the same.

[00:37:06] It's this house of God.

And if they were involved in some humble effort to rebuild this temple, God said, well, it's this house that will be filled with future glory, greater glory. Perhaps you think that if you're involved in teaching and preaching and encouraging believers today, it's a very humble task.

Often you may speak to just very few. It's nothing that will give you a lot of recognition anywhere, really. But God says, it's the same house. The glorious start at Pentecost, that was the assembly. And if you look at Revelation 21-22, the heavenly city in all the glory, that's the assembly.

[00:38:01] And the humble circumstances you see today, and you may spend time and effort on, well, that's the assembly. That's, what is it, an expression, it's part of the assembly of God.

And God connects those, and He says, the latter glory is greater than the former. And it really gives a lot of dignity to work, which in itself is a very humble work.

Now, chapters 4-6 show us that when a good work is going on, there is also going to be opposition.

At first, the opposition is very friendly. People come and say, we want to build with you, because, you know, we believe the same thing as you. We've practiced the same worship since the days of Esau Haddon, an Assyrian king, who brought us here. [00:39:02] And already they have betrayed themselves, because the people who that Assyrian king had sent there, they didn't belong to the people of God. And 2 Kings 17 tells us that they had a terrible mixture of idolatry and worship of Jehovah. Now, when this kind offer is refused, they change tactics. They try to trouble them over a long period. And what happens is that, once the new king has stood up, has the hearing, the enemies write a letter and say, you must stop these people.

And what happens is that the king actually decides, yes, they should stop. And so the chapter 4 ends by saying, so the building ceased. And on the surface of things, you would say, well, there's nothing they could do about it. [00:40:02] If the king passes a decree which says it's forbidden to build, and they were hindered by force, so they couldn't build. But the next verse then, opening of chapter 5, mentions the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. And if you read Haggai, you'll find that there were other reasons below the surface. People had lost interest. People had become more interested in their own affairs. And so the prophets showed us what was going on underneath the surface. And it's interesting that those things often go together. If there's a lack of exercise, God may just close the door. But it also shows another thing.

And I think it helps us to put two arguments into perspective.

We've emphasised that it's important to return to Jerusalem, be in the right place, which means practice the right principles. [00:41:08] But based on what was just said, you see that it's possible to be in the right place, to cling to the right principles, and yet not to be in the right conditions. It could be that the people are in Jerusalem, but more interested in their own home than in the house of God. And I think we need to balance this as well today. Yes, we want the right principles, but we also want to ask ourselves, what conditions are we in? And we shouldn't play off one against the other, but we

should try to get both right. Yes, get the right principles. But then also, let's ask the Lord that we might be in the right state, that he is clean of what he finds in our hearts. Now, happily, through the ministry of these prophets, this was achieved. [00:42:07] It doesn't mean that the opposition stopped. People still wrote letters, but interestingly, the answer from the king was different. Darius, the next king again, writes back and says, yes, we have searched. Yes, the decree of King Cyrus was found in an unlikely place, but it was found. And please tell these people to go on, and even pay their expenses. And that's what happens when there is a real exercise in our heart.

And if there is a lack of exercise, God can close the door. But when there is a real exercise, God will help. And he will make sure that there is success.

As it says here, that the house of the Lord was completed, that's chapter 6, verse 15.

[00:43:08] In the last passage of chapter 6, and I'd like to close with that, you find a few more nice features.

Two other pieces are recovered, the Passover, remembrance of their redemption in Egypt, a piece of unleavened bread, but also, and this is the main point I'd like to close with, they brought an offering, which is very interesting, in verse 17. Just read chapter 6, verse 17.

They offered at the dedication of the house of God and 100 bullets, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and for a sin offering for all Israel, 12 eagles, according to the number of the tribe of Israel. How could they do that?

[00:44:02] How could they do that?

First of all, 10 tribes had disappeared in Assyria. Secondly, most of the two tribes were left in Babylon. And here they were, this minority. But when they bring a sacrifice, they don't say, ah, we are the people. We now offer just a sin offering.

When we admit before God that there was failure, we have the whole people in mind.

We want the blessing of the whole people of God. They had to go back to Jerusalem because that was what God wanted them to do. But it's not that they claimed to be the people of God, but they took account of the whole people of the 12 tribes.

Now may the Lord give us that we receive some help from this book of Ezra, [00:45:01] and that there might be a revival in our hearts, and that we might rediscover these things, the altar, the right place, the foundation, and that there might be a bigger, a greater response to him.