

Ezra

1. Introduction and the prophecy fulfilled

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For some Books in the Bible, many of us, including myself, think that they are not very important because of the length and less frequent sermons that are taught by pastors and Bible teachers.

The Gospels, the NT Books by apostle Paul, John, and Peter, the major prophets' Books, of course, the Pentateuch are the ones we think are important.

But what about the minor prophets' Books, 2 and 3 John, and Ezra? When was the last time you got so excited to study these Books? I felt the same way before I started to read Ezra and started to dig in. Originally, I thought, "We can blaze through this Book in 2-3 studies." Now, I am not so sure. There is so much for us to learn from this man Ezra and what he said through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that it would be injustice to this wonderful Book. So let's take time to learn from the Lord through this man of God, Ezra.

A. THE AUTHOR AND THE TIMELINE

In the Hebrew Bible, the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah are one Book, because they were written by the same author Ezra the priest. According to the Jewish tradition, he also wrote the Books of Chronicles. It makes sense because Ezra had access to the records and the kings' chronicles from the temple.

Many Bible scholars believe that the Book of Ezra was written around 440 B.C. During this time, the northern 10 tribes of Israel were taken captive by Assyria. Since they chose to worship the idols of the pagan nations around them, the Lord allowed them to be taken out of their land in order to teach them a valuable lesson.

An interesting thing about the Book of Ezra, the author Ezra doesn't even show up until chapter 7. Obviously he was not a Hollywood celebrity or self-appointed celebrity, because if Ezra was one of those celebrities, he would talk about himself from page 1 and all over.

B. THE POLITICAL BACKGROUND

The Assyrians had repopulated the territory in the north and had intermarried with the Israelites which resulted in the Samaritan people. Between the Samaritan people and the Jews, there has been a long lasting racial conflict.

The Babylonians had conquered the Southern Kingdom of Judah and took away most of the Jewish people from their homeland and had left the region of Judah mostly deserted. It had become a sabbath land for seventy years since they chose not to obey the Law of the Lord in this matter.

While the Israelites were in Babylon as captives, the Babylonian Empire was overtaken by the Persians. Later the Persian kings started to allow them to return to Israel to rebuild the temple and Jerusalem.

The returning to their land of Israel took three phases:

1) **The first group of 50000 led by Zerubbabel** (Ezra 2:2) came back to Israel and participated in the construction of the temple.

2) The second group of 2000 led by Ezra (Ezra 7) joined in rebuilding the temple.

3) The third group of an unknown number of the Jews led by Nehemiah came and helped restore the city wall of Jerusalem.

C. THE THEME OF THE BOOK

The theme of the Book is “Revival and reformation”. We will learn that revival and reformation of the Jewish people were not done through pep rallies or motivational speakers, rather, through getting to know the Word of God.

Ezra 7:10 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.

Ezra is a true man of God’s Word. He was a man with a passion and heart for God. He was not only a teacher of the Word of God, but also a doer of His Word. We all should be like Ezra, amen?

Ezra had made a decision to prepare his heart and life to seek the Law of the Lord which means that he sought after the heart of God. He would be, if nothing else, a careful and consistent student of the Torah – God’s Law, God’s Word. That would be the characteristic mark of his life.

He was, therefore, a “scribe”-which is another way of saying a “careful teacher of the Bible.” People in Ezra’s day knew they would get sound Biblical counsel when they went to him for advice. He made God’s Word his guide.

I love the balance in Ezra 7:10, because Ezra also set his heart on doing what the Law of the Lord taught. The biblical principles he discovered from God’s Word would guide his life. He yielded his heart to God’s divine directions. To remove this ingredient is to make one’s life fall flat. Without a commitment to practicing what we learn from God’s Word, we start to become Bible-stuck-up snobs. We may become conceited. We may also become harsh. Without that commitment, we may lose touch with people like the Pharisees of Jesus’ days. If we study the Bible for the sake of study only, we are in danger of becoming isolated scholars.

1 Corinthians 8:1b Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies.

But Ezra set his heart on studying so as to carry out and put to use what he learned from God’s Word. He kept asking, “So how does this apply in our lives?” He looked for ways to implement, to put into practice the teachings of the Scriptures.

When it’s all said and done, isn’t that exactly the goal of our study? To have one’s life changed? We cannot, we must not, study the Bible for the simple sake of study or to add another biblical information in our spiritual library. The Word of God was not given to satisfy idle, intellectual curiosity. It was given to change lives, influence homes, alter business practices, heal relationships, and, in the final analysis, to make us more like our Savior.

Ezra is my kind of man.

D. THE CENTRALITY OF THE TEMPLE

In our time our worship centers around the person of Jesus Christ, not a church building. But back in the days of the returned exiles, the building was central because God had promised that a representation of His presence would dwell in His

temple. Therefore, when the temple had been destroyed, there was a distinct sense of the loss of God's presence to the Jewish people.

With all this in mind, the people knew the importance of rebuilding the temple so that the glory of the Lord could return. It was that task to which Zerubbabel and his people applied themselves in chapters 3 through 6. The construction of the second temple started in 536 B.C. and completed their work in 516 B.C.

I hope that our church building doesn't take 20 years to finish it.

E. THE PROPHECY FULFILLED

Ezra 1:1-6 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, 2 Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah. 3 Who is among you of all His people? May his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel (He is God), which is in Jerusalem. 4 And whoever is left in any place where he dwells, let the men of his place help him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, besides the freewill offerings for the house of God which is in Jerusalem. 5 Then the heads of the fathers' houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, with all whose spirits God had moved, arose to go up and build the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem. 6 And all those who were around them encouraged them with The Book of articles of silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with precious things, besides all that was willingly offered.

What does it mean that this pagan king Cyrus fulfilled God's prophecy that was given through Jeremiah? I am glad that you had that question in your heart. Please go to Jeremiah 29:10:

Jeremiah 29:10 For thus says the Lord: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place.

The Book of Jeremiah was written around 585-580 B.C. Our God in His infinite wisdom declared a prophecy that He would bring His people back from the captivity of Babylon 50 years before it happened.

If you think that it was a mind-boggling, try these:

Isaiah 44:28 Who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd, And he shall perform all My pleasure, Saying to Jerusalem, "You shall be built," And to the temple, "Your foundation shall be laid."'

Isaiah 45:1-4 "Thus says the Lord to His anointed, To Cyrus, whose right hand I have held-- To subdue nations before him And loose the armor of kings, To open before him the double doors, So that the gates will not be shut: 2 'I will go before you And make the crooked places straight; I will break in pieces the gates of bronze And cut the bars of iron. 3 I will give you the treasures of darkness And hidden riches of secret places, That you may know that I, the Lord, Who call you by your name, Am the God of Israel. 4 For Jacob My servant's sake, And Israel My elect, I have even called you by your name; I have named you, though you have not known Me.

Cyrus' name was named in the Book of Isaiah that was written 700-680 B.C. which was 150 some years before the actual coronation event happened. And Cyrus was not even in his great grandparent's mind when the Lord named his name in this ancient prophecy Book.

One of the greatest apologetics of the Bible is the fulfillment of the prophecies. You see all these prophecies that were made by Nostradamus at the beginning of the new year on tabloid magazines. They are so vague. But God's prophecies were detailed and fulfilled each time and will be fulfilled. He has a perfect track record.

F. APPLICATIONS

- 1) Let's follow God's teaching; adjust our life to His Word; obey His truth; and practice what we learn from the Word of God.
- 2) Let's not allow any other passion to overtake our passion for our Lord.