

Lesson 1

Why Study Ezra?

Although some of the comments in this introduction will apply to Esther as well as to Ezra, we will have a separate introduction later for the book of Esther.

We are about to spend a lot of time studying the book of Ezra. Apart from being a book of the Bible and apart from telling us a great deal about God (which are certainly reasons enough to study it in depth), why should we spend so much time studying Ezra?

One way to approach that question is to look at the major themes of Ezra. Anytime we study a book of the Bible verse by verse over an extended period of time, we run a risk. The risk is that we will fail to see how those verses tie together – that we will fail to see the themes of the book. Not every book in the Bible is like the book of Proverbs, which for the most part would still make perfect sense even if you put the verses in a shoebox and shook it up!

So what are the themes of Ezra? We will consider that question in more detail later, but let's look at a few now.

As we work this book together, we will see that it has three primary themes: the temple, the law, and the wall. And we will see that each of those themes in Ezra has a counterpart for us today.

We will also see two themes about the people of God in Ezra – their continuity with the people of God who came before them and their separation from the heathen nations that surrounded them. (Lev. 20:26 – “And ye shall be holy unto me: for I the LORD am holy, and have severed you from other people, that ye should be mine.”) And, again, those are important themes for us as well.

We will also see two themes about God on display throughout Ezra as well as Esther – God's steadfastness and God's sovereignty. God is faithful to his promises, and he is steadfast in fulfilling them and working on behalf of his people. 1 Cor. 1:9 – “God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.” And God is sovereign over his creation. Earthly rulers serve God's purposes – whether or not they intend to do so!

Each of these themes has an important message for us, and we need to keep them all in mind as we study this book.

Let's look now at twelve specific things that Ezra teaches us and that explain why we should devote so much time to studying what many might think of as an obscure and relatively unimportant book.

Reason #1: Ezra teaches us about history

Ezra teaches us about one of the most interesting periods of time in man's history, and certainly one of the most important periods of time in God's plan of redemption. Absent the events in Ezra, the church could not have been established in Acts 2 according to prophecy. That is how important this book is!

As the handout shows, during the 300-year period from Nabopolassar until Alexander's conquest

of the Persians, we see a string of Babylonian kings and then Persian kings surrounded elsewhere in the world by such figures as Buddha, Confucius, Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle. With all that was going on in the world, who would have thought that the most important events by far involved a few hundred thousand former captives located in a backwater Persian province? But things are not always what they seem. God's plan was at work, and God does not need the might or wisdom of man to accomplish his plans!

But why should we study all of this history? The theme of the Bible is the redemption of man through Jesus Christ, but that theme is not just a philosophical idea that is disconnected from daily life. Instead, it is developed within the history of mankind – and most of that history centers on the history of one people, Israel.

Over half of the Bible consists of historical narration in which the inspired writers repeatedly emphasize God's role in that history. Thus, to understand Ezra, we must understand its historical context. The study of this history will also provide some modern lessons because the Bible teaches us that the way God works with his people in one historical context, such as the Persian Empire, can help us understand how he works in other contexts.

Yes, Ezra is history – but it is so much more than just history. Those who see Ezra as only history are much like the scientist in the cartoon on the handout who must be told that he is not trying to cure diseases that occur only in guinea pigs! We need to be sure that we don't miss the big picture in our focus on the historical details. There is a reason God included all of this history in his word, and it was not so we could all ace our advanced placement exams!

Marcion lived from around AD 85 to 160. He believed that the actions of God in the Old Testament were incompatible with the teachings of Jesus in the New Testament. This view was an outgrowth of the Gnosticism that is roundly condemned in the New Testament. Marcion still has his followers today – those who believe the God of the Old Testament is not the same God we see in the New Testament. I know of a very well-known gospel preacher who left the church for that very reason – he could not reconcile in his mind the God of the Old Testament with the God of the New Testament, and he ultimately concluded that they were two different Gods.

Of course, that view is completely wrong. There is one God, and the God we see in the Old Testament is the same God we see in the New Testament. And the nature of God has not changed. The loving God we see in the New Testament is the same loving God we see in the Old Testament.

We cannot hope to understand all that God wants us to know about him if we fail to study the Old Testament. We can't understand all that God wants us to know about the New Testament without studying the Old Testament. The Old Testament takes up about 3/4 of the entire Bible – that alone should tell us something about its importance in understanding what we need to know about God and his plan.

The church is built not just on the foundation of the apostles, but on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets (Ephesians 2:20). The roots of the New Testament are in the Old Testament, and we cannot hope to understand the New Testament without studying the Old Testament. (And vice versa – those who try to understand the Old Testament apart from the New Testament have a veil over their eyes (2 Corinthians 3:14).)

Ezra teaches us about history – and it is history that God wants us to know about and understand.

Reason #2: Ezra teaches us about fulfilled prophecy.

Predicting things is easy – just ask any weatherman. The difficult thing is to predict something that actually happens, and particularly so when the prediction includes the time frame in which the event will occur.

The Bible does that over and over, and such fulfilled prophecies are perhaps the clearest statement of the inspiration of the Bible. Fulfilled prophecies should cause people with honest hearts to believe what the Bible says about other matters – and leaves those who do not believe with no excuse for their disbelief. Books of the Bible that show God’s prophetic power are here for a very important reason – they reinforce the divine origin of this book.

Think about the gospel writers, for example. They repeatedly point back to the Old Testament to show that what was happening was a fulfillment of prophecy. Why? Because that fulfillment showed that what was happening was from God. And, more importantly for our question, it presupposed that the readers of those gospel accounts knew the Old Testament and were familiar with those prophecies. If knowledge of the Old Testament was important then, is it any less so today?

What, after all, is the purpose today of the Old Testament? **Galatians 3:24** – “Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ.” Trying to learn the New Testament apart from the Old is like studying without a schoolmaster. The Old Testament guides us in our study of the New; it explains what we are seeing in the New and why we are seeing it. The Old Testament provides the context for the New. We cannot properly understand the New Testament apart from the Old Testament. That is why God gave us both.

What prophecies are fulfilled in Ezra? We will consider that question in more detail as we move through the text, but let’s consider two examples now – an immediate example and a distant example (distant as viewed from the time of Ezra).

The immediate fulfillment of prophecy is mentioned in the very first verse. The return of the people to Jerusalem from Babylonian captivity occurred as Jeremiah had foretold – and when Jeremiah had said it would happen.

We talked about these prophecies when we studied Daniel 9. Specifically, the prophecies are:

Jeremiah 25:11 “And this whole land shall be a desolation, and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.”

Jeremiah 29:10 “For thus saith the Lord, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place.”

What is this 70 year period? The first deportation likely occurred in 605 BC. If we count out 70 years, we get 535 BC, which is close to the year when the first exiles finally returned to the land. (We discussed this question in great detail in our study of Daniel.)

So, Ezra begins by showing the fulfillment of an immediate prophecy – the return from the 70 year exile.

As for the distant prophecy, we need to go back to Isaiah 2, which was written over 100 years before than Ezra. Isaiah 2:3, in a prophecy about the church, states: “For out of Zion shall go the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.” Luke 24:47 tells us the same thing: “And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.” And Acts 2 shows this very thing happening as foretold by Isaiah 2.

How does prophecy from Isaiah 2 relate to Ezra? Simple. For the prophecy of Isaiah 2 to be fulfilled the people of God had to be in Jerusalem in the days of the Roman kings – which Daniel 2 tells us is when the church would be established and Acts 2 tells us is when the church was established. They Jews could not stay in Babylon. They could not be scattered to the winds as had happened with the Northern tribes. They had to be in Jerusalem in the first century.

And more than that – the temple had to be around in the first century as well, and when Daniel was written the temple had been destroyed. That meant the temple had to be rebuilt.

How do we know that the temple had to be around in the first century? Because Matthew 24:15 tells us that Daniel had prophesied about the destruction of the temple at the hands of the Romans. Also, John 2:17 tells us that one of the prophecies of Jesus was that “The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up.” How could that prophecy have been fulfilled absent a temple?

In short, for the prophecies about Jesus and his church to be fulfilled, the Jews had to be in Jerusalem in the first century and the Jewish temple had to be in Jerusalem in the first century. Neither of those things is true when the book of Ezra opens!

One more example of fulfilled prophecy – the book of Ezra is a fulfillment of Isaiah 44:28.

“That saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid.”

And that prophecy from Isaiah is one of the more remarkable in the Bible. Why? Because it mentions Cyrus by name over 100 years before he was born.

Josephus says that these prophecies were what caused Cyrus to issue his decree:

“Accordingly, when Cyrus read this, and admired the Divine power, an earnest desire and ambition seized upon him to fulfill what was so written; so he called for the most eminent Jews that were in Babylon, and said to them, that he gave them leave to go back to their own country, and to rebuild their city Jerusalem, and the temple of God, for that he would be their assistant, and that he would write to the rulers and governors that were in the neighborhood of their country of Judea, that they should contribute to them gold and silver for the building of the temple, and besides that, beasts for their sacrifices.”

The Bible tells us that God stirred Cyrus to do these things – perhaps God did that stirring by putting Cyrus’ name in a book written a century before Cyrus was born! That would certainly have stirred me!

Reason #3: Ezra teaches us about leadership

In addition to being a book of history and a book that shows the fulfillment of prophecy, Ezra is a very practical book. If you want to know how to live a life that is pleasing to God in AD 2015, then studying these events from 500 BC is a very good place to start.

Some of the most practical lessons in the book of Ezra center on leadership – something that is sadly lacking today both in the world and in the church.

We at Fleetwood are very blessed to have strong Godly leaders, but many congregations are not as blessed. The biggest problem facing the church at large today is a lack of proper leadership. (If you are not thanking God every day for Godly leaders, then you should start.)

But that leadership problem does not end with the church. Leadership seems to be a vanishing quality outside the church as well. The current occupant of the White House, for example, was recently described by one of his own White House officials as “leading from behind.” One might add, from very far behind! And that lack of leadership is not confined to a single political party.

Leaders do not operate in a vacuum. When a leader arises, people recognize it. Leaders are not hidden. Leadership from behind is not leadership. Leaders are out in front – leaders lead!

In my opinion, the greatest secular leader of my lifetime (and I was born during the Kennedy administration) was Ronald Reagan. And no one, including his opponents and perhaps especially his opponents, doubted that he was a leader. People recognized it. He carried 44 states in his first election and 49 states in his second. Where today is the leader who could do that? You really need to have lived through the transition from Jimmy Carter to Ronald Reagan to understand the power of leadership. I don't see anything comparable today.

What are the characteristics of a good leader? First, they know where they are going. Second, they are courageous. Third, they are willing to risk unpopularity. Fourth, they are dedicated. Fifth, they are focused. Sixth, they have their priorities right. Seventh, they practice what they preach. Eighth, they are not focused just on themselves. And we could go on and on.

The book of Ezra gives us examples of those qualities, and for anyone wanting to be a leader or wanting to know what a leader should be like, Ezra is a very good place to start.

Reason #4: Ezra teaches us how to deal with criticism

Anyone who follows the example of leadership in the book of Ezra will also need to follow another example from the book of Ezra – how do you deal with opposition and criticism?

Such attacks in Ezra came both from within and from without. There are two types of criticism from within – that from within the group and that from within the person. Perhaps the most debilitating type of criticism is self-criticism and self-doubt. “It will never work! Who will ever listen to me? Why should anyone listen to me or follow me?” If one adds on top of that the same chorus from one's fellow workers and from those on the outside looking in, then work will almost always grind to a halt – and we see that happening in Ezra.

Anyone running the race for God can expect Satan to throw up one hurdle after another – and most

of those hurdles involve criticism. How should a child of God respond?

First, you should determine whether the criticism is valid. If it is, then the critic has done you a favor, and you should respond accordingly.

Jesus, as in all things, is our perfect example in this. He faced a constant and unending barrage of criticism from the Scribes and the Pharisees, and we see how he dealt with that. But they likewise faced severe criticism from Jesus. Their criticism of Jesus was not valid, but Jesus' criticism of them was valid. When we are faced with criticism, we need to determine whether it is valid or invalid – and the only way to do that is by using the word of God. If the Pharisees had looked into that law they claimed to know, they would have seen the truth of Jesus' criticisms of them.

If we can't recall the last time we heard a valid criticism, then that may be an indication that we are not doing this all-important first step. We should not just automatically assume that all criticism is invalid. That attitude puts ourselves in the place of God. The only person who never heard a valid criticism was Jesus.

Second, if the criticism is not valid, then you should remain focused on your task and not allow the criticism to derail or delay you on that path. Criticism will always be there, and so you should not be surprised by it. Instead, you should expect it, be ready for it, and deal with it.

Again, the book of Ezra gives us some wonderful examples on how to deal with criticism and opposition. It also gives us some examples on how not to deal with criticism and opposition! At times, God's people allowed God's plans to get off track due to opposition, and God's prophets had to encourage them to get things back on track.

One of the abiding lessons of the book of Ezra is that God can turn opposition to his advantage. Those who fight against God the most very often find themselves doing the most to advance the plan of God! Think, for example, about the Jews of the first century who fought against Christ and sought his death – it was by that death that Christ blessed the entire world as had been foretold long before! That is what Paul says in Romans 11:12, 15 – “Now if the fall of them be the riches of the world ... [and] ... For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world.”

It reminds me of what Joseph said to his brothers in Genesis 50:19-20 – “Fear not: for am I in the place of God? But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.” We see examples of this in Ezra.

Reason #5: Ezra teaches us about restoration

The people returned with a purpose—to restore the temple. Although it would not possess the splendor it once enjoyed (3:12), both the people and God would be pleased (Hag. 1:4-9).

But it was not enough to restore just the physical, outward forms; hearts must also be restored. Restoring a building is a great undertaking, but restoring the heart is the most difficult task of all. There would be little advantage in having a wall to defend against enemies if the people inside the wall had corrupt hearts.

The word “restoration” is an important word in the Lord's church today. It is not (as some teach)

because the church of Christ is a product of the restoration movement in the sense that our history begins with the restoration movement. It is instead because the church today is a restored church. What do I mean by that?

For many years, the Lord's church was almost (not entirely, I believe, but almost) completely absent from this world having been lost in a sea of religious error and confusion. Eventually, some began to turn from that religious confusion and turn instead to the Bible to determine what God wants from his people. And, in doing so, the church of the New Testament was restored by following the pattern laid out in that New Testament.

Did the history of the church begin with that restoration? Obviously not – the word “restored” points us back to something earlier, and that earlier thing was the kingdom established in Acts 2. That is what was restored, and the fact that we are a part of that kingdom today after it was almost non-existent for so many years is what I mean when I say that the church today is a restored church. (And we should thank God every day that it has been restored.)

That history of the church – from loss to restoration – is the history of Ezra. The restoration in Ezra does not involve the restoration of the church – the new Israel – but rather involves the restoration of the temple and the restoration of proper worship for the old Israel.

If we want to understand the importance of restoration – and of the constant need for us to continually compare what we are doing with the pattern in the Bible – then Ezra is the perfect place to start.

Is restoration of the church today a *continuing* activity? Yes and no. Some people who say that restoration is a continuing activity do so to argue that the church is just another denomination, and that all denominations are on the road to restoration, and that we may just be a bit further ahead than some of the others on that road. I completely reject that notion for at least two reasons.

First, I reject their premise. I see no evidence that any of the denominations are on the road toward a restoration of the divine pattern for the church. If any are, then that is good – but they will have to abandon their denominationalism if they want to follow God's pattern. It has happened before – most of the leaders in the restoration movement came out of denominations – but the key phrase there is “came out.” You cannot be a part of a denomination and be pleasing to God. That is not God's pattern for the Lord's church.

Second, I reject the idea that restoration is a continuing process in that sense because the restoration movement was a success. The church was restored, and members of the church of Christ today are members of the same church that we see in Acts 2. In that sense, restoration is not a continuing activity but is rather a completed activity.

But, if by continuing activity we mean that we must be constantly vigilant to compare what we do with the pattern in the Bible, then yes, it is a continuing activity in that sense.

And one more point – by restoration of the “New Testament church” we do not mean the restoration of the individual congregations that we see in the New Testament. Many of those congregations needed their own restoration!

Revelation 2:4-5 – “Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, **and do the first works**; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.”

We have been studying on Wednesday about the many serious problems in the Corinthian congregation. We don't want to restore that! What is being restored is the perfect pattern for the church that we find in the New Testament.

But restoration is not just a corporate activity. Christians must do more than just compare what we do in worship with the pattern of the Bible – we must also compare our lives to that pattern. Jesus left us the perfect example to follow, and we should always be comparing what we do with that perfect pattern.

Psalm 51:10, 12 – “Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. ... Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation.”

Whatever it is that we are trying to restore, Ezra shows us how to do it – we must return to the word of God. If we look anywhere else our attempts at restoration will fail.

Ezra 7:10 – “For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.”

Ezra has been called the book of Acts in the Old Testament, and there are similarities. A big difference, of course, is that Acts shows us the establishment of an eternal kingdom that was yet future in the days of Ezra. But Acts and Ezra are similar in the sense that both show the people of God turning to a pattern from God to know how that should properly worship God.