

## LESSON 2

### Reason 6: Ezra teaches us about the church (continued)

To see something else that Ezra teaches us about the church, we need to look at Ezekiel.

Daniel, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah lived at the same time, but only Daniel and Ezekiel were exiled to Babylon – Jeremiah stayed behind. And while Daniel lived in the king's palace, Ezekiel lived and prophesied among the exiles.

Ezekiel 37 begins with one of the most amazing and well known prophecies in the entire Bible. Ezekiel is taken in a vision to a valley filled with human bones that had been dried, bleached, and scattered.

In verse 3 Ezekiel hears a question that must have seemed preposterous to him: "Son of man, can these bones live?" But Ezekiel's answer in verse 3 indicates his appreciation for God's power. "O Lord GOD, thou knowest."

God tells Ezekiel to preach to these dead, dry bones, and Ezekiel obeys despite the apparent absurdity. He tells the bones to hear the word of the Lord! (Whenever we are tempted not to proclaim God's word because we think we already know our audience's response – remember Ezekiel! Did any preacher ever have a deader audience?)

Ezekiel's obedience produces immediate results. Even before he finishes, Ezekiel hears the noise of the bones coming together and being covered by flesh. They stand up as a vast, living, reconstituted army.

In verses 11-14, God interprets the vision for Ezekiel. This vision was God's response to the people's feeling of hopelessness. "Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off."

Can these bones live? Can a dead and powerless nation in exile and under the control of a godless nation be resurrected and become a living, thriving kingdom once again?

God's message was that the nation would live again; the people would settle again in their own land; and, the people would know that it was God who had brought them back to life.

Starting in verse 15 of Ezekiel 37, we find a sequel to the vision of the dry bones.

Ezekiel was commanded to perform a symbolic action. He took two sticks and identified them with inscriptions denoting the two former kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Ezekiel then made **one stick** of the two by holding them together. Through this symbolic action Ezekiel portrayed the reunification of the revived nation.

In verse 18 Ezekiel is asked what this all means, and Ezekiel explains that God was going to join (literally “give”) Joseph (the Northern kingdom) to Judah (verse 19). God was going to restore and reunite the nation under one king (verses 18-22). Further, the nation would never again be divided (verse 22) and never again would the people serve idols (verse 23). The restored nation would have David as its king (verse 24). They would be united under one shepherd (verse 24). They would live under a covenant of peace (verse 26). The people would dwell securely forever (verse 25), and a sanctuary would be built among them that would remain forever (verse 26).

Were the people united under one king from the line of David after their return from exile? No – Cyrus and his successors remained their king. Were they restored to one nation? No – the Northern tribes never returned. They remained divided. Were they united under one shepherd? Did they live under a covenant of peace? Did they dwell in the land securely forever? Did the new temple remain forever? No to all.

Those things did not happen when the exiles returned – **but they did happen**. They are all blessings enjoyed by the church. Ezekiel 37 begins by describing the blessings enjoyed by the returned exiles – but Ezekiel 37 ends by describing the blessings that God had in store for the church.

Those prophecies were fulfilled not by the rebuilt temple but by the eternal kingdom that came into being in the first century as Daniel had foretold.

In short, when we study about the return from exile in Ezra we are studying about the church and God’s plan for the church. There is no other way to read Ezekiel 37. The return from exile and the church are intricately intertwined.

The return from exile in the days of Ezra was just a small foretaste of what God had in store for his faithful people. The fullness of God’s plan would come five centuries later when the eternal king came into this world as a “babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.” (Luke 2:12)

We must not study Ezra in a vacuum. We need to keep in mind all else that God tells us, both about

what was happening at that time, and about what God was doing at that time to prepare the way for Christ and the kingdom of Christ.

## **Reason 7: Ezra teaches us about separation**

There is a strong emphasis in Ezra on separation from any form of defilement with the surrounding people.

The Jews who returned were a tiny island in a great sea of people and religions. It was important that they remain pure in doctrine, customs, and ethics. They needed to be “in the world, but not of the world.”

Some of Ezra’s actions may seem harsh, but those actions show us how important it was in God’s plan that his covenant nation continue. The people had been carried into exile because they broke the covenant, and Ezra did not want that to happen again.

This time was a crucial turning point in the history of the Jewish people. The northern tribes had dissolved into the world; would that happen to Judah? Unchecked assimilation with their neighbors would have meant the end of their role in God’s plan.

The church needs to hear this message today. We know that we cannot completely separate ourselves from the world “for then must ye needs go out of the world” (1 Corinthians 5:10). We must be in the world to preach the gospel to the lost. But the command of 2 Corinthians 6:17 remains: “Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you.”

One way in which we are called to be separate from the world is the same way that the exiled Jews were called to be separate from the world – they were told to be separate from people who claimed to worship the same God, but who did not worship God in spirit and in truth.

Listen to what the exiles heard from their neighbors in Ezra 4:2 and ask yourself if we hear similar questions today: “Let us build with you: for we seek your God, as ye do.”

And the response? Verse 3 – “Ye have nothing to do with us.” That response might seem unloving or un-neighborly to some, but it was, of course, the proper response as the remainder of Ezra shows again and again.

Ask yourself how the book of Ezra would have turned out had Ezra opened the doors wide to all who claimed to seek God as they did. Ezra knew that claim was false. How? Because Ezra knew the law of God, and Ezra knew those neighbors were not following the law of God. Their disobedience put the lie to their claim to seek God as Ezra did.

The church of Christ is distinctive. And when we quit believing that or quite teaching that, then we will cease to be the one church that God wants us to be. We are not just another church on the block! We are the eternal kingdom of Christ promised in Daniel 2 and established in Acts 2. The “church of Christ” is not our name; it is our description. We are the Lord’s church.

## Reason 8: Ezra teaches us about scripture

Ezra repeatedly affirms the centrality of the Law of God in the life of God’s people.

God’s people love and follow God’s word. And one of the clearest ways to see those who are **not** God’s people is to see how they treat (or rather mistreat) the word of God.

The revival in Ezra started with those who “trembled at the words of the God of Israel” (Ezra 9:4; 10:3). Ezra calls the people back to “the Law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given” (Ezra 7:6). Ezra repeatedly says that the people acted “in accordance with what is written” (Ezra 3:2-4; 6:18).

Perhaps more than anywhere else in Scripture, the book of Ezra the Scribe shows us the power of God at work through written texts.

In Ezra 7:25, King Artaxerxes writes to Ezra and says: “And thou, Ezra, after the wisdom of thy God, **that is in thine hand.**” What was in Ezra’s hand? The law of God, which is the wisdom of God. Is it in our hands?

There is a crucial lesson here, especially for us today. Why especially for us today? Because we are losing our ability to read.

What do I mean by that? Obviously, I do not mean we are becoming illiterate. What I mean is that we as a society are losing our ability to read deeply. To read and study a written text to understand what it means. And why are we losing that ability?

Think for a moment about Twitter, which has been in the news a lot lately. What does Twitter teach us about reading?

“First: you shouldn’t focus on any one thing for long. The world can and should be understood in short, simple statements of 280 characters.

Second: the world should be interpreted and confidently understood very quickly.

Third: what matters most is whether people immediately agree with and applaud your short, simple, speedy statements. A successful statement is one that lots of people immediately applaud; an unsuccessful statement is one that people immediately ignore or condemn.”

That is not the way to study the Bible or teach the Bible.

Bible study requires time and depth. We need to slow down and focus on the text. We need to stop and think about what we are reading.

And the most important truths will most often be unpopular when they are first heard. The popularity of our message should not be our guiding principle.

So am I saying that social media is changing us? Yes, that is what I am saying. It is changing us, and not for the better.

The proportion of Americans who never read a book in any given year tripled between 1978 and 2014. Some 57 percent of Americans now do not read a single book in a typical year. As of 2017, the average American spent seventeen minutes a day reading books and 5.4 hours a day on their phone.

One thing Ezra teaches us is that God’s people are a **reading** people. We cannot be the people God wants us to be if we approach God’s word the way we approach Twitter or Facebook. God’s word demands depth, and time, and focus — and our society is quickly losing all three of those things.

And I am not saying this as an anti-technology Luddite who wants us to all go back to Kerosene lamps and dusty books. I am saying this as someone who has three degrees in electrical engineering. We can use these tools for God, but we need to use them in the right way, and we need to be aware of their dangers to our spiritual well-being.

## Reason 9: Ezra teaches us about worship

Worship is central in Ezra and also in Nehemiah. When the first group of exiles returned from Babylon, they first built an altar to sacrifice to God; only afterwards did they build the temple. Still later they built the walls. Worship was their top priority.

“In an age of experienced-centered, clap-happy worship and entertainment-orientated evangelism the books of Ezra and Nehemiah direct our thoughts to a holy God who demands reverent worship and uncompromising loyalty from his people.”

The temple was vital to the Jewish people. Why? Because it was a symbol of God’s presence and because it was a reminder that they were to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6).

When the temple was completed, the people celebrated with a large dedication service, where they “offered a hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred male lambs and, as a sin offering for all Israel twelve male goats” (Ezra 6:17). Soon afterward they celebrated the Passover. Then when the city wall was complete another great celebration was held (Nehemiah 12:27-13:3).

Worship plays a central role in Ezra. The people wanted to worship, they loved to worship, and they celebrated when they were able to worship God once again in the way that he wanted to be worshipped.

Their desire to protect the purity of their worship explains their emphasis on separation.

If I ever see worship as a dull, boring affair – then I need to study Ezra. By studying Ezra, we may see worship in a new light.

If we were suddenly unable to worship here because we had been dragged off into exile somewhere – and if one day we were able to return here and worship again – what would that worship service be like? Would we perhaps return with a new appreciation for the blessings we enjoy when we worship God at this place?

And our worship should be a delight to us!

C.S. Lewis: “The most valuable thing the Psalms do for me is to express the same delight in God which made David dance.”

The exiles experienced that delight when they first returned.

Did the exiles' excitement in worship last? Sadly, no, at least for many of them. The delight and the excitement seem to have faded for many.

Malachi preached to the people not long after Ezra and Nehemiah returned, and here is how he described the people's view of worship in his day:

“Ye said also, Behold, what a weariness is it! and ye have snuffed at it.” (Malachi 1:13)

Where do we fall on the scale between those who longed and loved to worship and those who snuffed at worship?

John 4:24 – “God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.”

Spirit alone is not enough, and truth alone is not enough. We must worship in spirit and in truth, and Ezra provides some wonderful examples of proper worship.

## Reason 10: Ezra teaches us about faith

The book of Ezra shows us what faith can accomplish.

Through faith the temple was rebuilt. Although there were obstacles, eventually God granted them success. We see in Ezra many great examples of faith. In fact, we will see that, as does Hebrews 11, Ezra includes its own roll call of faith.

Here is what one commentator had to say about Nehemiah, but it also applies to Ezra.

“Today there are many problems in the Lord's church. Commitment to truth seems to have diminished among those in whom it once appeared to be strong. Many are saddened at the apostasy of some churches and brethren and the wishy-washy attitude of others. Historically God's people have endured such challenges and discouragement. The way out is through faith. God is not unaware of the problems or those who often feel alone in upholding His ways. If faithful churches and brethren focus only on the problems, it will result in shrinkage and more loss. In addition to meeting the challenges that false brethren pose, we must continue preaching

the Gospel to all the world, restoring the pattern, and trusting in God's providence. As those of Nehemiah's day, we need to use one hand to hold a sword (to defend against error) and use the other hand to build the wall of the church (each new convert being a living stone). God will grant success."

So there are many reasons to study Ezra, and not just these 10! We could given many more reasons as well. Ezra has many vital messages for God's people of any age and time.

## Where Are We and How Did We Get Here?

When Ezra opens, God's people are living in Babylon under a Persian king. How did they get there? We need to answer that question before we can fully appreciate what was involved in getting them back to Jerusalem.

We considered this question when we studied Zechariah, and we considered it again when we studied Daniel, so we won't spend as much time on it as we would if this were the first time we were looking at this history.

At the beginning of the book of Daniel, Babylon had conquered Israel and carried Daniel and his friends into captivity. By the end of that book, the Babylonian kingdom was gone, and Medo-Persia was in control.

Daniel had prophesied about four earthly kingdoms – Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome – that would be swept away by the eternal kingdom, the church.

Our studies in Ezra and Esther will center on the second earthly kingdom in that list: Medo-Persia. All of the events in Ezra and Esther (and also in Nehemiah) took place during the time of the Persian Empire.

Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar in 587 B.C. Jerusalem was destroyed, many of the Jews were killed, and most of the others were carried off to Babylon. After Nebuchadnezzar's death in 562 B.C., the empire declined rapidly.

The Medes and the Persians were Indo-European tribes who moved south from Russia. First they settled in the northwestern part of Iran but later they migrated further south. The Medes occupied the western part of Iran south of the Caspian Sea, while the Persians moved farther to the southeast to



part of Iran just north of the Persian Gulf.

The Persian kings were called the “Achaemenids” (a-KEY-muh-nids) after the founder of the dynasty, Achaemenes, who was followed by Teispes (Cispis). We have record of two branches of Teispes’ family. One son, Cyrus I, ruled from 640 to 600; and his son, Cambyses I, ruled from 600 to 559. Cambyses I was the father of Cyrus the Great. After the reign of Cambyses II, who followed Cyrus the Great, Darius the Great took over the throne. But he was from the other branch of the Achaemenian family, through Teispes’ other son, Ariaramnes.

Until the time of Cyrus the Great, the Persians were vassals of the Medes. But eventually, Cyrus was named king of a combined Medo-Persian kingdom in which the Persians were dominant. We looked at how that all came to be in our study of Daniel.

Babylon had reason to fear the growing empire to the north. Cyrus quickly marched across Upper Mesopotamia, conquering Armenia, Cappadocia, and Cilicia; then he defeated Croesus, king of Lydia, in 547, gaining control over the Greek cities in Asia Minor. He then conquered more territory in the east into what is now Afghanistan; so the Persian Empire reached from there to the western shores of Asia Minor. It was only a matter of time before Cyrus would take over Babylon.

In 539 Cyrus ordered one of his officials to attack Babylon, and the city was quickly taken.

Herodotus tells us that the Persians were able to enter Babylon by diverting the Euphrates River, which ran through the city, into an artificial lake, thus lowering the water level enough for the soldiers to enter the city and take the Babylonians by surprise.

Daniel 5 described how Belshazzar fell from power suddenly one night while he was banqueting.

Xenophon corroborates this. He said the Persians attacked the city during a festival when “all Babylon was accustomed to drink and revel all night long.”

Herodotus wrote: “The Babylonians themselves say that owing to the great size of the city the outskirts were captured without the people in the center knowing anything about it; there was a festival going on, and even while the city was falling they continued to dance and enjoy themselves, until hard facts brought them to their senses.”

Many of the Babylonians looked upon Cyrus as a liberator. The Jews were also optimistic about the potential political change because of how Cyrus was known to treat those he conquered.

The Assyrians had been very cruel. They had harshly suppressed the peoples they conquered; many times they had moved entire populations from one land to another and then replaced them with other conquered peoples. This is what they had done when they conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C.

The Babylonians, although somewhat less cruel, followed much the same policy. When Jerusalem was destroyed in 587 B.C., many of the Jews were taken captive to Babylon.

When the Persians took control, however, Cyrus encouraged the peoples he conquered to develop their own culture and continue their own religion. He and some of his successors even helped support the local priests in conquered nations. After conquering Babylon, he restored the place of Marduk as their principal god and allowed captive peoples to return to their homelands.

We know much about Cyrus from the famous Cyrus Cylinder – a clay barrel with a long inscription in cuneiform writing honoring Cyrus. It is mainly concerned with Cyrus's conquest of Babylon and was written to influence public opinion in his favor and legitimize his rule over Babylon.

It is a long inscription that first tells of the misdeeds of Nabonidus and Belshazzar. Then Cyrus continues:

Marduk ... scanned and looked through all the countries, searching for a righteous ruler willing to lead him in the annual procession. Then he pronounced the name of Cyrus, king of Anshan, and declared him ... to become the ruler of all the world.

The cylinder also tells us how Cyrus treated the gods of the people he conquered:

I returned to these sacred cities on the other side of the Tigris, the sanctuaries of which have been ruins for a long time, the images which used to live therein and established for them permanent sanctuaries. I also gathered all their former inhabitants and returned to them their habitations. Furthermore, I resettled upon the command of Marduk, the great lord, all the gods of Sumer and Akkad whom Nabonidus has brought into Babylon to the anger of the lord of the gods, unharmed, in their former chapels, the places which make them happy.

As we will see, the resettlements in Jerusalem came from a similar pronouncement that we will read about in Ezra.

One key difference is that, rather than returning an image, Cyrus returned to the Jerusalem temple the precious vessels Nebuchadnezzar had taken.

The Persian Empire now included all of Babylon and Syria-Palestine. Although not mentioned in the Bible, Cyrus's son Cambyses II conquered Egypt in 525 B.C., making the Persian Empire greater than its predecessors.

In 522 Cambyses II received bad news from Persia: someone impersonating his brother Smerdis had taken over the Persian government. Cambyses had earlier ordered his brother murdered so this would not happen.

Cambyses hurried back to Persia. But according to Herodotus, on his way through Syria, "as he was springing into the saddle, the cap fell off the sheath of his sword, exposing the blade, which pierced his thigh." Cambyses died three weeks later.

Meanwhile at Susa the usurper was killed by a group of seven conspirators. Darius, one of the seven conspirators, was named king. This was Darius the Great. Under him the Persian Empire reached its greatest power and most efficient organization. (This is **not** the Darius of Daniel 6:28.)

Darius left many inscriptions telling about his exploits. The longest and most famous is the Behistun Inscription carved on a huge rock formation on the main road that led from Mesopotamia to Iran. The inscription was carved on a cliff, 225 feet above the plain. It also includes reliefs of Darius, his officials, and his subjects. In the carved image, Darius has his foot on the imposter he replaced.

It was during Darius' reign that the construction of the temple in Jerusalem was resumed and completed (Ezra 5-6). As we will see in Ezra 4-5, the Jews' work on the temple had been halted because of the opposition of their neighbors. Cambyses apparently had supported the opposition – and isn't it interesting that he died unexpectedly while "springing into the saddle"!

In Ezra 6, the Jews informed Darius that Cyrus himself had authorized the building of the temple. Darius searched the archives, found that it was true, so he again authorized the construction and commanded the opposition to cease.

At the same time, in 520 B.C., God raised up the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, who told the people that they should renew the work on the temple. The people responded, God removed the opposition, and the temple was dedicated in 515 B.C. (Ezra 6:16-18).

#ezra-esther