

Ezra: The Structure and the Servants of the Temple



This is our fifteenth stop along Route 66. We are in the historical section of Scripture. God took a man named Abraham, made a covenant with him, put his descendants in Egypt, and while there, grew them into a mighty nation of over two million people. They came out of Egypt and traveled through the wilderness, but it took them awhile to get through it. They received God's law at Sinai. Through Joshua, they entered into the Promised Land. That is where we entered into this second geographical region of Scripture. The first five books dealt with the Law, the Pentateuch; God calling and forming a people. There are twelve historical books, and this will be our tenth book in that section. They are teaching us how God took those people He called and redeemed, and through a man named Joshua, He led them into the Promised Land. Under judges, they did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and did what was right in their own eyes at the same time. They wanted a king like their neighbors. But God didn't want them to have a king like their neighbors. Before Judges was over, we quickly realized that Israel needed a king. Then in the first part of the historical books (Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles), we discovered God was going to send them a king. The king was going to build God's house, but Solomon blew it. The wisest man on the planet did what I think is the most unwise thing a man could do; he loved more than one woman. He had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. Instead of them

going to church with Solomon, Solomon went to church with them, and before he knew it, their gods had turned his heart from God, and sin brought the house down. In 606 BC, 597 BC, and 586 BC, the southern kingdom goes into Babylonian captivity. The book of Kings is written to tell them why they are there. Chronicles was written to tell them why they have been set free from Babylonian captivity and that they are supposed to be building God's house.

The Purpose of Ezra

Ezra is not going to answer the question why. Ezra is actually going to deal with the 'what' and the 'how' of rebuilding the Temple. Our Scripture text will be from Ezra 6:13-15, and then a few verses in chapter 9, to give us the overall structure of the book of Ezra. Originally, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were one book in the Hebrew Bible. The good news is that Ezra and Nehemiah were not divided by the Greek translators of the Bible; that honor goes to a man named Origen, one of the early church fathers. As he studied those books more, he decided to divide them in two. The reason Ezra and Nehemiah are divided into our Bible is because when Jerome translated the Bible from Greek to Latin, he also followed that early church father. Because our English Bibles rely heavily on the Latin Bible, our English Bible also divided Ezra and Nehemiah into two books. It is amazing because hundreds of years later that is what the Jews did. Because of us, they divided their Bible too. The reason I say this is because if you see how Ezra and Nehemiah fit together, then you see how the historical period of Israel ends.

Now remember, all of the historical section is telling us that we are looking for a king, and he is going to build the house of God. We know that king is ultimately not Solomon, and the house is not a physical temple being built in Jerusalem. The King who is coming is Jesus Christ, and the house He is going to build is not a physical house, but a spiritual house. The house is the Church of Jesus. Did you catch that? The Old Testament is anticipating the coming of a King who is going to build the Church of Jesus Christ. Notice that after the children of Israel go into Babylonian captivity and then

come out, the last books of the Bible do not talk much about the king, because there is no earthly king in Israel's history that can do what needs to be done. We are waiting for the Messiah. He is the Son of God and the Son of man. So, the end deals with is the house.

When you put Ezra and Nehemiah together, we see how there is a need to rebuild the walls of the Temple. When Nehemiah comes, we see there is a need to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. But when Ezra comes in the middle of the two, we discover how the people who are building the walls of the Temple and the walls of the city need another wall around them, and that is the wall of the Law. The first part of Ezra will deal with the building of the Temple structure, but the second part of Ezra will deal with the building of the Temple servants. So that is what we are going to be looking at in Nehemiah. Chapters 1-6 deals with the structure of the Temple. Ezra 7-10 deals with the servants of the Temple.

Ezra is kind of hard to read. Here is why. From chapter 1 to chapter 7, there is a period of eighty years. Between chapters 6 and 7, there is a period of sixty years. Four different kings of Persia are mentioned in Ezra, which covers a period of over one hundred years. There is a lot of information in the book of Ezra, and we are going to try to see the big picture in this lesson.

Scripture

***"Then, according to the word sent by Darius the king, Tattenai, the governor of the province Beyond the River, Shethar-bozenai, and their associates did with all diligence what Darius the king had ordered. And the elders of the Jews built and prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. They finished their building by decree of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia; and this house was finished on the third day of the month of Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king."* (Ezra 6:13-15)**

Beyond the river is what the Persians called the region where Israel was. They had divided the empire into twenty regions, or provinces. If you were to look at a map of the Persian Empire during the days of Cyrus and you were to put it over a modern map, it would cover Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel, Greece, and Rome. If you were to take a map of the continental United States and put it over a map of the Middle East, that would have been the size of the Persian empire. Wow, that is a lot of area! The 6th year of Darius was 515 BC.

Our next Scripture is chapter 9:1-6. Remember that chapters 1-6 dealt with the structure of the Temple. Chapter 9, near the last part of Ezra, is dealing with the servants of the Temple. Ezra discovers that the people who are building the building have not made a separation from the peoples of the land and their abominations.

Scripture

"After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost." As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled. Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the faithlessness of the returned exiles, gathered around me while I sat appalled until the evening sacrifice. And at the evening sacrifice I rose from my fasting, with my garment and my cloak torn, and fell upon my knees and spread out my hands to the Lord my God, saying:

"O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens."

Rebuilding the Temple

Ezra divides easily into two sections, 1-6, and 7-10. Notice Ezra begins like Chronicles ends, with the decree of Cyrus, king of Persia, to rebuild God's Temple in Jerusalem. But you will notice that the Spirit of God moves on the spirit of the king. Please understand that the Temple that is going to be built in Jerusalem is not a work of man, but a work of God. But when God begins to work, He usually works through man. So when we see the building of God's Temple, it is going to be a work of man only because it is a work of God. God moves on Cyrus's spirit to rebuild the Temple. He decides the best way for him to rebuild the Temple is to set God's people free. If he sets God's people free, they will surely want to build the Temple. But in the first chapter of Ezra, the Bible says when Cyrus sets the people free and gives them permission to head back home, God moves on the spirit of the people leaving to go back home to desire to rebuild the Temple. I want you to see that whether we look at the Old Testament house of God or we look at the New Testament house of God, it is a work of God through man. Let's be careful not to give man credit for what God deserves to be credited. The building of God's house today is not a work of man; it is a work of God.

- **The Second Exodus**

Ezra tells us that fifty thousand people leave Babylon and head to the Promised Land to start rebuilding the Temple. Now to me, that sounds like a lot of people. Chapter 2 tells us about all these people. But when God first took His people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land, there was over two million. Now, in this second exodus out of Babylon, (the first was the exodus from Egypt) there is only fifty thousand. Fifty thousand isn't very many compared to two million. Have you ever thought about what it must have felt like to be one of the original twelve and Jesus saying to you, I am going to build My *ecclesia*, My own house, and then He gives you

marching orders to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations and there is twelve of you? It is amazing what God can do with numbers!

I just want to start Ezra by asking this question. Has God stirred your spirit to be a part of His work in building the house of God? If you are one of those people, please don't get discouraged when you look around at the numbers of the world and the numbers of God's people. The most important thing is God has stirred your spirit. And if so, are you actively participating in building God's house? We are not the Old Testament people of God. We are the New Testament people of God, and the King has already come, and He is building God's house, which is you and I.

Now remember, the children of Israel went into Babylonian exile in three deportations, 606 BC, 597 BC, and 586 BC. But when they came out of Babylonian exile, the Bible also records three dates. Our first date is 539 BC. King Cyrus overthrew the Babylonian empire in 539 BC. In this first year, he sets fifty thousand Jews free to go back to their homeland, and they are led by a man named Zerubbabel. But when Ezra opens, King Cyrus does not commission Zerubbabel, he commissions Sheshbazzar. When they get to the Promised Land, you don't read about Sheshbazzar, you read about Zerubbabel. Therefore, a lot of people think it is the same person with two different names. However, in the chronology of Chronicles, you discover that Sheshbazzar was the uncle of Zerubbabel. That is why it is important not to skip over the genealogy in Chronicles. Cyrus commissioned the uncle, but the nephew carried out the work of God. Zerubbabel gets back to the Promised Land, and starting at about 537 or 536 BC, the first thing he leads the children of Israel to do is to rebuild the altar.

- **Construction Begins With the Altar**

Remember, they have been commissioned to rebuild the Temple. If it had been me, I would probably have built the Temple and then put the altar in, because the altar wouldn't be complete without the Temple. But they did not do it that way. Zerubbabel started with the altar, and I love this because sometimes we get the cart before the horse, so to speak. The Bible says when the fifty thousand get back in the home land and they look

around at all the neighbors, they got scared. Then they decided it was going to take way too long to build the Temple and they needed to start with the altar. So they build the altar, make a sacrifice, and start celebrating the festival of booths. What is Ezra trying to tell us? The altar was the place where God atoned for the sins of the nation. The altar was the place where they sacrificed the sacrifice to get right and to stay right with God. Ezra is saying that before you start building the house of God, you had better make sure you are right with God because you will discover that you cannot stay right if you do not start right.

Have you ever wondered why you have a problem staying right? It is possible that you are trying to deal with your sins, but you have never dealt with your sin. Did you hear that? You will struggle with your sins all your life until you deal with your sin. What is your sin? You are a sinner, and you are separated from God. If you have never turned from a life of sin, never put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ, you are a sinner. I am not picking on you; I am just telling the truth. Your nature is to sin, your nature is to do wrong; you cannot help it! The reason you can't is because you are alive to the power of sin within you and dead to God, and it is your nature to sin. You have got to get right before you can be right. You got to be right before you can stay right. You do not deal with sins until you deal with sin. Before God begins to move on your heart to build the house of God, He is going to move on your heart to be a part of the house of God. The way you become a part of the house of God is by repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. The Bible says the moment you admit that you are a sinner and put you faith in Jesus as your Lord and Savior; you are made right with God.

Now, once the children of Israel get right with God, they lay the foundation for the Temple. We are at around 536 BC; remember that date. They lay the foundation for the Temple, the young people rejoice, shout, and sing praises, and the old people cry. One group is sad, the other group is happy. Imagine being one of those young people who come out of the land and you had heard about the Temple that got burnt, but you had never seen it, and now you see the foundation being laid. But imagine you are one of the older folks. Remember, you have been in captivity just seventy

years, so some of the folks coming out of captivity had seen the Temple as a kid. Solomon's Temple was massive, and now they start seeing this foundation under Zerubbabel and they weep, because it is not near as magnificent. To the older generation, it almost appears as if the glory of God will not be restored back to the way it was in the day of Solomon. Why? It's because the glory will not be restored until the Messiah comes.

- **The Enemy Causes Building to Stop**

So they lay the foundation of the Temple, they began to build the walls, and all of a sudden, the enemy comes out against them. Then, the people who are living in the land want to get in on it and they try to help. Zerubbabel tells them they cannot work on the Temple because this is a job for God's people alone. That sounds kind of harsh, does it not? But let me be honest, you need to be careful when your enemy tries to befriend you. Ezra wants us to know that the people who began to build God's house, even though God is going to work through them, will be opposed.

When I was a young Christian, especially a young minister, one of the hardest lessons I had to learn was when you start doing the work of God you are going to have an enemy, because He has an enemy. Do you understand that? If you are in this for popularity, for pleasure, or for prestige, you are going to be in big, big, trouble.

- **Haggai and Zachariah Encourage Work to Resume**

Right off the bat, the enemy tried to join them. They were told they couldn't and then tried to discourage them. When they couldn't discourage them, they tried to bribe councilors to take away their building permit, and the next thing you know, the building stops. Then in chapter 5, God raises up two prophets, Haggai and Zachariah. Now get this picture. The children of Israel have Zerubbabel who traces his lineage back to David. They have Jeshua who traces his lineage back to Aaron, and now they have Haggai and Zechariah, two prophets. So literally, you have a king, a priest, and two prophets. The prophets prophesy reminding them that they do not need a building permit from Darius because they have a building permit from God and from Cyrus. He encourages them to go back to building, and they start building afresh.

Now, in the New Testament, Jesus told the disciples that all authority had been given to Him in Heaven and earth. This was right before He commissioned them to go into the world and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them all things that is commanded us, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and He would be with us always even unto the end of the age. Did you hear this? The person who has all the authority in the world said to the Church, here is what you are to do. Now, should we ever question our authority? Absolutely not! I don't get this Christian stance that says my relationship with God is personal. This is about me and God...no!! Yes, it is about you and God, but it is about you and God because God wants you to break into people's lives around you under His authority and make disciples of all people! People do not have the right to believe what they want to believe! Did you hear that? God commands all men everywhere to repent, but they will not repent until they have heard the good news of Jesus Christ. That is where we come in, and we have been authorized by God to make disciples of all nations. How many of you are still waiting for a building permit? How many are still trying to check it out? You and I have been authorized.

Ezra Comes to Jerusalem

As Chapter 6 comes to a conclusion, they build the Temple. Eighty years of time have passed from chapter 1 to chapter 7. But between chapter 6 and 7, sixty years of time passed. Now in chapter 7, Artaxerxes the First is now reigning. Remember, there was King Cyrus, his son, Cambyses, then you had a grandson, Cyrus II, then Xerxes. He was the man who married Esther. Then following Xerxes, there was Artaxerxes. Artaxerxes reigned from 464 BC to 424 BC.

In the seventh year of the reign of Artaxerxes, Ezra comes to Jerusalem. This would make it 458 BC, our second date. Our first date was 539 BC, Zerubbabel comes to the Promised Land, and he starts building the structure of the Temple. Then, Ezra comes next. You see, the book is named after Ezra, but Ezra records what Zerubbabel does, and then records what God did with him. Ezra quickly realized that the hand of God was all over him and whatever he asked of King Artaxerxes, the king gave him. Basically, Artaxerxes gave him a blank check and said whatever you

need, make sure you do it, because I want your people to do what God wants them to so that God will bless me and all my sons. A pagan king is beginning to understand what God promised Abraham, and that is a Messiah will come from this group of people who will bless all the nations of the earth. He is beginning to understand that his blessing from the God in Heaven is because of this people called Israel!

- **Ezra as Scribe**

The next thing the Bible says is that Ezra is a scribe. The Bible says that Ezra is a scribe who is very skilled in the Law of Moses, which God gave him (Moses). Then the Bible makes this statement in Ezra 7:9-10; he studied the Law, he did the Law, and he taught the Law. Did you hear that? He knew the Law, he did the Law, and then he taught the Law. I like to say it this way: Ezra knew, did, and shared. He knew, he did, and he shared.

Now, you and I are not under the Law of Moses today, but we are under the Word of God. Imagine what would happen if we knew God's Word, did God's Word, and shared God's Word! Do you think that like Ezra, we might lead other people to do what God wants us to do, and that is not just have the walls of His House around them, but to have the wall of His Word around them?

Building of the Temple Servants

In 539 BC, God sends Zerubbabel and fifty thousand people to rebuild the wall of the Temple. But in 458 BC, God was not only concerned about the structure of the Temple; He was concerned about the servants of the people. This is crucial. See, the first part of the historical books talk about the kings, and the end of the historical books talks about the House, but here is the message we ought to be getting. God is not just concerned about building the House; He is concerned about the builders who are building the House. Ezra is he is going to deal with the servants. He is going to deal with the Levites. He is going to deal with the priests. Now don't say that you are not a priest. You are a priest. If you are a believer in

Jesus Christ, the New Testament says you are a priest of God. We are a royal priesthood; we are a holy priesthood to God! Just as the Levites and the priests offered sacrifices and incense to God, we offer our bodies as a living sacrifice to God!

Do you know God's Word; I mean really know it? Do you know it because you study it, or do you just know it because of what somebody else said? Has anyone ever told you what the Bible says, and then you looked it up for yourself and it didn't seem to say what they say it said? I wouldn't trust anybody, not even me. I would check me out.

I used to go to a Bible conference, and the speaker would get ready to quit teaching and all the preachers in the conference would beg him to go longer. That is a preacher's heaven, to want to quit and the people want him to say more. The preacher would stop and say, "I've already taught you more than you will ever live up to," and then he would walk off the stage.

Are you living up to what you already know to be true? Do you 'life' out the principles of God's Word? I believe it is very hard to share with people who know you, if you know that they know you are not doing what you know. That is why it is so easy for the Church to go to Brazil, and Thailand, and Nicaragua, and Arizona; they don't know us! It's as if all that matters is that we share what we know; we don't have to be doing it. That is why so many who go on those trips never come back home and share it here; because they are not doing it! Am I not right? It is really hard to witness to your neighbor when your neighbor knows what you are doing over that tree between you all! Are you kidding me?

We know it, so we can do it, so we can share it; and Ezra shared it. He first gets there in 458 BC, and the first group had left around 538 BC. That is eighty years. The Temple is built! Now, if the Temple has been standing for eighty years, wouldn't you think the people that know it, are doing it? Well, Ezra just assumes that and he begins getting others to share it with him. He is getting the priests to do what they are supposed to do, which is teach the Law. All of a sudden, somebody says, Ezra you need to know something. They have taken Ammonite, Canaanite, Perizzite, and Hittite

wives. These were Assyrians who were brought there, by the Assyrians, when they overthrew the Northern Kingdom. They were not Jews. The exiles, fifty thousand of them, many of them married a foreigner. Now, a foreigner had nothing to do with race; it had to do with religion. This is not about the color of somebody's skin. This is about the color of somebody's heart. When Ezra heard that even the priests had married people who worship other gods, Ezra came unglued! He lost it. He had a breakdown and he tore his clothes off. He pulled out the hair of his head and he pulled out the hair of his beard. He was appalled; he was humiliated! He sat down, and he wouldn't eat or drink!

- **A Pure People**

You and I read this with no reaction at all, as if it is no big deal. Remember Genesis 6, the sons of God saw that the sons of man were beautiful, and they chose wives from them. It was the godly line of Seth intermarrying with the ungodly line of Cain. What did God do? He wiped out the planet! What did God do when Solomon married other women and he started serving their gods? He burned down the House! And now they had just started over, and Ezra hears that they are doing the same thing again. He tells God, we are over our heads in sin and iniquity! Our sin has mounted higher than the Heavens! Boy, isn't it amazing how we look at ourselves and think we are doing pretty good? And Ezra says we are in over our heads here, and he is expecting God to wipe them out at any moment. Then the people say yes, we have broken the covenant with our God, but we can get out of these marriages. Each one of them divorced their wives, and even left their children. Now this looks horrible in our modern day. But what is Ezra trying to say? There a holy race and it is getting mixed, and we can't have this. Even to the point that to make this right, we have to divorce our foreign wives and abandon our foreign children. What is this trying to say? There is a people who must remain pure, so that when the Messiah comes from the pure line, the whole world can know who He is.

Most of us have never thought about what if Jesus really isn't the Messiah. Most of us have never really entertained the thought of what if our God is not the real God. We have been raised on Christian soil, in a Christian church, in a Christian family, so we just accept that. It is kind of like some

Hindus accept what they have been taught, and like some Muslims accept what they have been taught. Therefore, we are living in a world today who really believes we are all going to the same place, but we are just getting there in different ways. That is a lie! But the question is how do you know? How can you show to a Muslim, a Hindu, or an atheist that there is one God and He is your God? You can walk him through the pages of the Old Testament and show him, through centuries and centuries of time, how God had a plan for there to be one people who would bring forth one Person who would bless all the nations of the earth. When you take all that God said about Himself and the children of Israel, over that long a period of time, the odds of it happening without God are none.

In order for the world to know, God's people must be pure! Isn't that the problem today? The reason many people do not see God today in God's House is because God's house looks no different from the world. Are you in the world but not of the world, or are you in the world and of the world? Has the Spirit of God stirred your spirit? Are you right with Him? Are you using your authority? If you use your authority as the House of God, are you pure? God wants His House to be separate; therefore, while we must be in the world, we must be different from the world. That is how we manifest His presence.