

EZRA (Teacher's Edition)

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AUTHOR-

The book of Ezra, whose name probably means “**The Lord Has Helped**”, gets its title from the main character of chapters 7-10. No one is certain if Ezra himself or another compiler wrote the book. But Jewish tradition (the Talmud) attributes the book to Ezra and there are sections written in the **first person** from his **point of view** (7:28-9:15). As we discussed before, Ezra is viewed by many as the author of 1 & 2 Chronicles and Nehemiah as well. In fact, Ezra and Nehemiah were recognized as **one book** in the Hebrew Bible.

Ezra is one of my favorites (as a person) in the Bible. He was a scribe and priest and a descendant of Aaron through Eleazar, Phineas, and Zadok. He led the second of **three groups** returning to Jerusalem from Babylon and led the returned captives in Jerusalem to make a new commitment to God's Law. Ezra was trained in the knowledge of the Law while living in captivity in Babylon with other citizens of the nation of Judah. He gained favor during the reign of Artaxerxes, king of Persia. This king commissioned him to return to Jerusalem about **457 B.C.** to bring order among the people of the new community. Artaxerxes even gave Ezra a royal letter (Ezra 7:11-16), granting him **civil as well as religious authority**, along with the finances to furnish the Temple, which had been rebuilt by the returned captives.

Ezra must have been a competent scribe and priest, since he found favor with the ruling Persians. But he was also devoted to his God and the **high standards of holiness and righteousness** that the Lord demanded of His people.

As he communicated God's requirements to the captives in Jerusalem, Ezra also proved he was a capable leader who could point out shortcomings while leading the people to a higher commitment to God's law at the same time. He gave great attention to the **reading of the Law** and had several priests help him read it, **translating and interpreting** it for the people's clear understanding in their new language **Aramaic**. This

reading process went on for **seven days** as the people focused on God's commands! (See **Nehemiah 8:1-8**)

Through it all, Ezra worked with a keen sense of divine guidance, "according to the good hand of His God upon him" (Ezra 7:9).

WHEN THE BOOK WAS WRITTEN-

Just as the Israelites were taken into exile in three successive stages (605, 597, 586 B.C.) they returned in three stages. The first occurred under Zerubbabel around **538 B.C.** After considerable delay, this return resulted in the rebuilding of the temple (c. **520-515 B.C.**), encouraged by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. Ezra led the second return in the 7th year of Artaxerxes 1 (**c. 458 B.C.**). Nehemiah led the final return in the 20th year of Artaxerxes 1 (**c. 444 B.C.**). As you consider this history, you may have noticed that we are left with a chronological gap of **80 years** between the two major sections of the book of Ezra. He probably wrote about Zerubbabel's return many years after it happened, drawing from official court records or some other account of the event. To this he added his own personal memoirs, now contained in the second section of the book. That leads us to the thought that if Ezra really was the author, he probably wrote the book between **457 B.C.** (the events of chs. 7-10) and **444 B.C.** (Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem). By the way, during the time period covered by the book of Ezra, **Gautama Buddha** (560-480 B.C.) was in India, **Confucius** (551-479 B.C.) was in China, and **Socrates** (470-399 B.C.) was in Greece.

ABOUT THE BOOK-

The book opens with a brief introduction that explains how the first return from exile happened. Cyrus, king of Persia, issued a proclamation allowing the Jewish people to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their Temple and resettle their native land. About **50,000 of the people** returned under the leadership of Zerubbabel, a Jewish citizen appointed by Cyrus as governor of Jerusalem (2:64-65). After arriving, they set to work immediately on the rebuilding project. In spite of some shrewd political maneuvering by their enemies, the work moved forward until the Temple was completed in **515 B.C.** (6:14-15). One note of interest is that many scholars believe the Jewish people in Babylon and Persia must have numbered at least **two million**. Yet only a small fraction chose to return to Jerusalem with the first group under Zerubbabel. This indicates that most of them probably had become comfortable with their lives in these foreign lands. Or perhaps the certainties of their present existence were more appealing than the

uncertainties of life in Jerusalem-a city which most of them **had never seen**.

The second major section of the book reports on the arrival of Ezra in Jerusalem with another group of exiles about **60 years** after the Temple had been completed. Just as Zerubbabel had led the people to rebuild God's house, Ezra's mission was to lead his countrymen to rebuild **the Law of God in their hearts**. His ministry as spiritual reformer probably lasted only **one year**, and in this year he had to deal with the Israelites' adoption of the pagan inhabitants' practices, including their marriages to foreign wives.

One thing issue that deserves some attention is Ezra's treatment of the pagan women whom the Jewish men had married (10:10-19). How could he be so cruel as to insist that these wives be "put away" (divorced) with no means of support? His actions must be understood in light of the drastic situation that faced the Jewish community in Jerusalem following the Exile. Only a small remnant of the Covenant People had returned, and it was important for them to keep themselves from **pagan idolatry and foreign cultural influences** at all costs. Ezra must have realized, too, that this was one of the problems that had led to their downfall and captivity as a people in the first place. Yet even the horrors of defeat and exile by the Babylonians had failed to teach the people a lesson. He was determined to stamp out the problem this time before it became a widespread practice among God's Covenant People.

As you consider the content of this great book, you see the contrast between God's **faithfulness** and the people's **unfaithfulness**. For example, when the people get discouraged because of the enemies' mockings, God faithfully raises up Haggai and Zechariah to encourage the people to complete their task- and they do. Again, when the people stray from the Word, He faithfully sends a devout priest in Ezra who artfully instructs the people in the truth and calls them to repentance and confession. Indeed, the generation in the land is so unfaithful that their "iniquities have risen higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens" (9:6)- but God's **faithfulness triumphs** in the end!

A BASIC ASSESSMENT OF EZRA (BASIC THEMES)-

There are so many great lessons in this book!

On one level, dealing with a people coming back from exile, we learn lessons on how to restore **true worship** in people or congregations who have fallen away from God and their first love. Let's face it: in view of the widespread erosion of vitality in church worship, the pathway to its

restoration is of utmost importance. Here are three principals that jump out on how worship was restored by Judah's returning exiles:

- 1) **Worship recovery begins at the Cross.** They began offering sacrifices on the brazen altar- the altar where sin offerings were presented- even before the foundation of the temple was laid (3:6). The Lamb that was slain must have His death appreciated **for its necessity!** True worship must be rooted in redemption's work and must focus on Christ's- not the generic "God's"- person. The most vibrant followers of Christ live in total **gratitude** of Jesus' death and resurrection- i.e. His saving them from their sins.
- 2) **Worship recovery will always be resisted.** When you read Ezra 4 & 5 you see the political struggles that arose when God's people tried to reinstate true worship in the center of the peoples. How true this is today! The rebuilding of the temple is a picture of any individual's or congregation's struggle to renew their first love and obedience to God. Resistance inevitably comes in some form, either human or spiritual, and in Ezra we see that it comes in the form of: 1) **attempts to discourage** (4:4), 2) **accusations of opposers** (4:12, 15); 3) **complaints that the new is not as good as the old** (3:12). I want to make this note: renewal does not always mean "new". Much of our "new" has nothing to do with the timeless truths of God. Renewal blends old and new together!
- 3) **Worship renewal is released through the prophetic.** Jeremiah, Haggai, and Zechariah were used prophetically to stir up renewal. Whether it is the flow of the prophetic gifts, or anointed preaching that draws people (**not drives them!**) God's Spirit flowing through people ministering under the anointing plays a critical role in true worship recovery.

On another level, the messages of Ezra are a constant reminder of how **easily** God's people can **lose heart** and their **moral distinctives** that are to characterize them as the royal, holy, called-out people they are. When this happens God's plans are delayed. But even though rebellious saints may **delay** God's plans, they cannot ultimately **thwart** God's sovereign purposes. God is so much greater than we are and He has His ways of transcending our shortcomings!

Also of note is the view we get of God's **faithfulness**. His faithfulness is seen in the way He sovereignly protects His people in the midst of a powerful empire while they are in captivity. They **prosper** in their exile! And He raises up pagan kings who are sympathetic to their cause and encourage them to rebuild their homeland. Added to this is the fact that

God raises up zealous and capable leaders who direct the return and rebuilding!

A POSSIBLE KEY WORD-

My key word is: **TEMPLE**. I say this because the entire book centers on the restoration of it and the **spiritual, moral and social** restoration of the people of God.

KEY VERSE(S) AND CHAPTER(S)-

I had two verses I struggled between, but finally decided that for this study I wanted to have just one key verse. My verse is: **Ezra 7:10**. To me this verse speaks to the awesome thought that God **uses individuals that are devoted** to Him to bring even entire nations back to Himself. I also thought that even though the temple was rebuilt, its rebuilding means **nothing if the people do not turn back to God in their hearts**, and God anoints people to bring about renewal. In relation to that, I chose as my key chapter: **Ezra 6**. This records something more important than just the rebuilding of the physical; the dedication of the temple stimulated **the obedience of the remnant** to separate themselves and keep the Passover.

JESUS REVEALED IN THE BOOK-

- Jesus is typified in the temple
- **We see Jesus in the role of priest and prophet**
- **Jesus is represented in the Passover**
- **Ezra is a type of Jesus: he fasted before his ministry for God (8:21), he was devoted to the law to do it like Jesus was to the Father (John 5:19), he called Israel to repentance as Jesus did**
- **Jesus is seen in the Law of God in that He Himself is the Word**
- Jesus is seen in the sacrifices

THE HOLY SPIRIT REVEALED IN THE BOOK-

- The expression “the hand of the Lord” which occurs six times, speaks of the Holy Spirit’s influence
- **The Holy Spirit is the one who moved the heart of Cyrus (1:1) and changed the attitude of the king of Assyria (6:22)**
- **The ministry of the prophets is done by the Holy Spirit**
- **The Holy Spirit protected them from their enemies (8:31)**
- **The Holy Spirit convicted the people about their sins and brought them to tears if repentance (10:1 & John 16:7-11)**

SOME TRUTHS AND APPLICATIONS-

Ezra 3:3

Godly living is standing up for what you believe in the face of hostile opposition. Be faithful to God and be bold in your faith in Him despite the possible hostility of the world around you.

Ezra 4:4,5

You will be opposed in following God fully. Don't be surprised and don't be deterred! Follow God radically and live to please Him- don't fear those around you.

Ezra 6:22

Don't fear man! God will make even your enemies to be at peace with you. He can give you favor with the ungodly. It is God who turns hearts; pray that God will influence those around you.

Ezra 6:1-12; 7:11-28

Submit to all authority, knowing that it comes from God. Believe that God can work blessing to you even through civil authority that may be hostile. Our faith in a sovereign God tells us He can work beyond all authority to accomplish His will. Submission is not restriction it is protection.

Ezra 8:21-23

Learn to put yourself in a position to have faith. Trust God! Don't be afraid to tell unbelievers of your trust in God and give Him total credit for answers to prayer. Make fasting and prayer a regular discipline in your life.

Ezra 9:3-15

Choose to intercede for God's people rather than to get into fleshly anger. Identify with their sin and confess it as your own. Leaders need to lead the way in confession and model Godly repentance for those they lead.

Ezra 10:1

Never be afraid to allow your emotions to be seen as you react to people's sins. It is OK to grieve and weep over people's lostness, brokenness, and rebellion.