

What's the Point....of Ezra?

Mark Garner

Chronicles ended with God allowing Judah to be overrun by Babylon, and many of the Judeans being taken captive. Yet this was to give the Judeans the chance to have a new start in their relationship with God. In the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, we see our Heavenly Father bringing a 'remnant' back to Judah, and the ways he helps them rebuild physically and spiritually.

Overview Of Ezra - Rebuilding & Renewal

Even as God sent Judah into exile, he had already prepared the way for a remnant to return. In Ezra we see some exiles returning to Jerusalem; yet even more importantly, we see many of the Judeans returning to God himself. We also see God's patience with the returning exiles, as he guides them from one step to the next. Ezra begins where Chronicles ends, with Cyrus of Persia's proclamation allowing for the Judean exiles to return to Jerusalem and Judah (Ezra 1-2).

For fifty years after the fall of Jerusalem, and seventy years after the first group of captives were taken to Babylon*, the exiles have been living under unbelieving rulers, and have had time to reflect on what God means to them. The king's proclamation shows us how God is providing for those who return. Cyrus announces that any of God's people may go up to Jerusalem, as well as providing for generous supplies and large amounts of money.

* Babylon took the first group of captives in 606 BC, a second group in 597 BC, and destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC, when they took many more Judeans as captives. Since then, Babylon has now fallen to Persia and Media in 538 BC, and Cyrus's proclamation was made in 536 BC.

God calls them to rebuild the temple first, instead of the city walls, as an earthly nation would (Ezra 3-6). They rejoice in rebuilding the altar and laying a new foundation, as God also rebuilds their hearts and their faith. Then opposition increases, and the work is abandoned for a time. So God sends the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, who help Zerubbabel to guide the rebuilding. As opposition mounts, God helps them now through Darius, who is now king of Persia, and who carefully investigates the claims and Cyrus's original decree. Soon the temple is completed.

Later, Ezra comes to teach God's words and to institute some reforms (Ezra 7-10). It is now 458 BC, and Artaxerxes is now king of Persia. First Ezra undertakes a hazardous journey, and he asks everyone to pray for God's guidance and protection. Ezra is well suited to help the Judeans, who still needed a lot of instruction even in basic matters. Ezra is patient and gentle with them, and he humbly prays for the Lord's forgiveness and his guidance.

Overall Thoughts

The book of Ezra shows us God's understanding and care at work, and it can encourage us and teach us as well. As God rebuilds Jerusalem and renews the believers, we're reminded of the ways our Heavenly Father rebuilds and renews us too. As we read Ezra, we can also see God worked in many ways to sustain and care for the people, and we can consider the similar things God does for us, as well as his promises to us.

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Caleb Dillinger

Ezra is the first historical book of the Bible that begins addressing what the Jews did after they had been exiled and enslaved by Babylon. Ezra is only 10 chapters long, so a very accessible read to the average reader. There are some numbers sure, and a lot of names. But if you skim over that, the content is relatively easy to process.

The book begins with Cyrus, king of Persia and ruler over the Israelites, declaring how God had given him all the kingdoms of the earth and charged him with building God a house in Jerusalem. The Jewish exiles are therefore allowed to return and begin building a temple.

A key character is introduced to help lead the people in this building project: Zerubbabel. He leads the Jews both physically and spiritually, including heading off the adversaries who wanted to interfere. Because Zerubbabel deters the opponents, they take a different approach: they write to the new king, Artaxerxes and get him to politically enforce the stoppage of work on the temple. Then the prophets Haggai and Zechariah (who get their own books later on in the Bible!) came in and stirred the people to work. A new king, King Darius (who will be the king during Daniel and the Lion's Den story) is contacted in a plea to make the Jews stop, but he in fact sides with the Jews!

Now we come to chapter 7. Yes, chapter 7. Do you know who finally gets introduced? Ezra! Ezra is only in the last 4 chapters of the book associated with his name (the first 60% does not mention him even once). Ezra is a scribe "skilled in the Law of Moses" (Ezra 7:6). He comes from Babylon to teach the Jews the law. Ezra wasn't just skilled - he was passionate. Listen to this description: For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the Lord, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel (Ezra 7:10).

Ezra helps with marriage laws, confession of sins, and the use of the Levitical priests. If you want to learn how to confess sin, Ezra is an excellent book. He says, "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." The book of Ezra ends on a weird note: a list of names of those guilty of marrying foreign women (and how some rectified this by divorcing their foreign wives).

So what's the point of this historical book? First, it's meant to show you that life doesn't end after one bad thing, no matter how bad that is. The Jews were so sinful God literally allowed them all to be captured. Yet, God opens doors for their restoration. Second, it shows how much patience is needed for growth. The Jews were not immediately reinstated, nor did things go smoothly! Time was necessary for them to mature and re-learn some of the things they'd forgotten. Third, it shows how God is in control. Not the Jews, not the leaders, not the opponents. God is calling the shots. Fourth, it reveals the necessity of passion, not just skill in leading people to God. These are just some of the points to remember when reading the book of Ezra.