

Church & Culture: How to Live in the City

Ezra 2

Ezra is a book that chronicles Israel's return from exile. As they return to their homeland they undergo urban *rebuilding* and spiritual *renewal*. In Ezra 1 we focused on the return from exile by asking the question: "How could Israel escape exile from Babylon?" The answer was missional pluralism. God's sovereign mission was accomplished through Persian pluralist politics. This missional pluralism calls us to action as Christians—to live as winsome citizens, exiles, and missionaries in our city. In fact, the running application from the life of Israel in Ezra is that we are called to be faithful citizens, exiles, and missionaries. [Diagram]. A *citizen* is a public servant who seeks the good of the city. An *exile* is a peculiar saint who resembles the goodness of God. And a *missionary* is a prophetic voice that shares the truth in love with fellow citizens. We all lean away from one of these, distorting our discipleship. The next three chapters of Ezra will focus on each role: Citizen (2), Exile (3), and Missionary (4). As we work through each one, search your heart and your life to see where the Spirit is convicting you to live in greater obedience to Jesus. So, in chapter two this morning we are asking two big questions. (1): "How did Israel rebuild the city?" (2): "What does it take to be a good citizen?"

Rebuilding with the World

In God's sovereign grace, working through Persian politics, the exiles returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the city. This is no small undertaking. Comprehensive urban renewal. Infrastructure, City center, homes, commercial buildings. Where do you start? How did they do it? Ezra 1 repeatedly tells us that the reason the exiles were released was to "build a house for the Lord" in Jerusalem (Ezra 1:2, 3, 4, 5). The house of the Lord is a phrase that is used over and over in the OT to refer to the Jewish Temple. The temple was the center of Jewish life and culture. It was where the presence of God dwelt. Centuries earlier the glory departed from the temple, a sign of God's disapproval of his people, their breaking of covenant with him. Now they were returning, just as Jeremiah had prophesied (29:10), so naturally they wanted to rebuild the temple and have the glory of God return to the temple. The presence of God among them. So the mission of Israel in their return from exile was to rebuild the temple. An urban and spiritual project devoted to the rebuilding of culture and the renewal of worship. How can they pull it off? Remember, this is much more than building a house in Mexico over a few days. This is comprehensive urban renewal. They are 500 miles away without airplanes or trucks. They have entire lives that must be uprooted (bills to pay, houses to sell, jobs to finish). Then there's the need for materials, money, and laborers. How are they going to rebuild an entire city, a holy city? Well, apparently they decided to *rebuild with the world*, with the pagans, not without them, not against them. They partnered with pagans to rebuild the holy city: *And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem...And all who were about them aided them with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, with beasts, and with costly wares*" (Ezra 1:4-6). Ezra tells us that Israel was assisted by "the men of their place" and "all who were about them." The gifts were from their pagan neighbors. What would compel such a remarkable act of generosity? The Jews were either terrible or terrific citizens. Either the Babylonians were fed up with the Jews "holier than thou" attitudes and neglect of their neighborhoods OR they admired the Jews and chose to support them with their own money and cultural goods. The Bible and history tell us it was the latter (Jer

29:7). The Jews were good neighbors to the pagans. They sought the good of the city. They were good public servants. In fact, the first bank was started by a Jew in Babylon.

Exiles and Citizens?

So how did Israel rebuild Jerusalem? With the help of the pagans. They worked *with* the world, taking their silver, gold, and goods. As it turns out, this isn't the first time they had favor with their enemies. In the first exodus, Israel received gold, silver, and goods from the Egyptians (Ex 11:2; 12:35–36). Moses was educated in the Egyptian school system. But the money and the goods came from idol-worshipping pagans. How could unholy money and culture be used to rebuild God's city? Isn't God against the pagans? Isn't Christ against Culture? And what about the strict genealogies required in Ezra 2? If you couldn't trace your genealogy properly, you couldn't be a priest, you were considered unclean (2:59-63). In other words, don't mix with pagans (9:10). If Israel drew lines within her own people, then surely she drew lines for those outside of her people? And didn't Israel get sent into exile because of her participation in pagan idolatry? What's going on here? All indicators seem to say not to work with the world. **Are we supposed to hang with pagans or run from them?** And how do we fit into all this, Christians, after all weren't not Jews. Consider 1 Peter 2, where a Jewish apostle compares the ethnically diverse Church to the people of Israel: "*But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession...*" The Church is the new Israel, the true Israel, the people of God, and it includes all peoples and cultures. Now, how are we supposed to interact with the culture of pagans and the pagans of culture? Hang or run? Exile or Citizen? Holy and set apart or citizens working with and alongside? Peter reminds us that we are **exiles**, peculiar saints called to be holy: "*Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable*" (2:11-12). The new Israel, like the old, is to abstain from the passions of the flesh, to have honorable conduct among the pagans. We are exiles in our city, called to love not lust, give not take, serve not demand. We avoid certain films, TV shows, and music. We don't sleep around, get wasted, or live beyond our means. We celebrate purity, goodness, and truth not look down on it. We honor our wives and husband, love our children, and follow Jesus. We fast from twitter, facebook, blogging and feast on Scripture, community, and mission. We run. We flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart (2 Tim 2:22). Our conduct is honorable and peculiar. We are exiles. And as exiles, we do not always look like the pagans. We keep Austin weird by being holy (not holier than thou), righteous (not self-righteous), Christ-like (not Christ belittling). We do it as a community of exiles, City Groups and Fight Clubs. If you're not in a City Group or a Fight Club, get in one. Be Weird. Be Peculiar. Exiles. That is one end of the spectrum. The other end is **citizens**. We are called to be exiles and citizens. As fellow citizens, we rub shoulders with pagans; we eat with them, we sing with them, we drink beer with them, we serve them, we share our lawn mowers, we help them move, we feed the poor, we teach them English, we make good art with them. We seek the good of the city; we rebuild social and cultural fabric of the city. Returning to 1 Peter, we live in such a way that we gain a good reputation with the city. Pagans see our good deeds and glorify our God: "*Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.*" Wherever possible we work with pagan culture and people for the good of the city. We support the city as

much as possible without sinning. We are public servants and peculiar saints. How do we do this? Perhaps you've heard the urban mantra: "Live, Work, & Play in the City." I say, "Live, Work & Play, for the good of the City."

- **Live:** *Live for the good of the city.* Promote safety in your neighborhood. Have neighbors over for dinner. Take meals to grieving or new neighbors. Look for opportunities to serve them. Watch their dog, their kids, their house when they are gone.
- **Work:** *Work for the good of the city.* Craftsman and servants went to Babylon and returned to Jerusalem. Many of us have jobs that serve the greater good of the city. Education, Medicine, Restaurants, Law, Social Services. What you do for work can serve the city. *How you work can serve the city.* Does your work ethic smell of Jesus, of honesty, sacrifice, and excellence? *Parent for the good of the city.* Raise children that are both exiles and citizens, that run from impurity and hang with pagans. Children who are blessing to their friends.
- **Play:** *Make good art for the good of the city.* The singers went to Babylon and returned to Jerusalem (2:41, 65). Support local artists and business. Tip well. Go to Blues on the Green. Most of you don't know this but The Parish is actually losing money on having us here. They are great neighbors. They are kind of like the Babylonian pagans supporting us. Let's be a blessing to them. Send them a thank you email. Come out to the shows. Buy a beer but not too many. (Ezra 6:8-10)

We rebuild and renew the city as a community of exiles and citizens. Fellow public servants with The Parish, Austin Children's Shelter, VIN Care, Angel Food, and our neighbors. Peculiar saints that strive to be honest, pure, excellent, like Jesus. Israel rebuilt the city *with the world*. They partnered with the pagans. That's how Israel rebuilt the holy city, as exiles and citizens. If you are a disciple of Jesus, these are two of our roles. We haven't even discussed our role as a missionary and some of you are getting overwhelmed. Why? Why are we freaking out? Two big reasons: 1) Busyness 2) Lack of Renewal. We will focus on busyness next week. Renewal now.

Renewal Before Rebuilding

Israel got the cart before the horse. They focused on rebuilding before renewing, and rebuilt in their own strength. Because of this they petered out. They get off to a good start in chapter three, but then they fade. The rebuilding of the temple alone took ten years with stops and starts. Ezra 4 tells us that Israel gave up. Nehemiah had to come to rebuild the wall. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah had to start preaching to wake them out of their urban indifference, their consumerist home improvements, and their general failure to be good citizens (Hag 1:2-11). They were buying new furniture, painting the walls, and buying housewares while the house of the Lord remained unfinished; they had abandoned their mission for God's glory and joined the mission of consumerist self-comfort. They put rebuilding before renewal, compromising their roles as exiles, citizens and missionaries. Instead of returning from exile to read the law, repent, confess sin, renew covenant with God and worship him, they focused on building, on being citizens and ended up consumers. They got it all backwards—rebuilding before renewal. Mission before Gospel. The city before Jesus. Many of us are in the same spot. We are striving to be missional without resting in the gospel. We are trying to rebuild the city without being renewed by our Savior. We have become consumers not citizens or worshippers. We insist on a standard of living that includes new cars, new homes, new phones, new clothes, and are stretched thin financially. Our houses are macked out while the house of the Lord isn't even self-supporting. We can't give because we have to support our ridiculous American lifestyles. We worship another god—comfort. We forsake the

house of the Lord for the house of comfort. Our lives and our families are bending under the weight of our ridiculous lifestyles. WE need to repent. We need to return. We need renewal. Israel's return from exile was ultimately a return to covenant, to communion with God, to worship. They returned to rebuild a TEMPLE not just a city, but they got tripped up. They lost their way. Their creativity, their talent, their gifts, their time was all tied up with something other than God's house. But that's not how they started. They started off with good intentions. When the exiles returned, they returned as a worshipping people—priests, servants, singers. Everyone gave to the work of the Lord: *"Some of the heads of families, when they came to the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem, made freewill offerings for the house of God, to erect it on its site. According to their ability they gave to the treasury of the work 61,000 darics of gold, 5,000 minas of silver, and 100 priests' garments."* Austin City Life has been hovering around 50% self-supporting for months as our church grows and grows. The same 25 people are serving in Set Up and Tear Down. We need new City Group leaders. The Lord is calling some of you out of consumerism and into worship, to give to him and his church. Give. Sign-up. Serve. Lead. But don't put the cart before the horse, rebuilding before renewal. As Israel deteriorated, as they returned from physical exile they were still in a kind of spiritual exile. Ezra responded by calling them to renewal through repentance (confession and change), faith in God's Word. In Chapter 8 he read the Law out loud and explained it clearly so that people could understand who God is and what he calls them to (8:8). He declared a fast (8-9). He led them in prayer. People wept and confessed their sin and idolatry. They reclaimed holy days. We need to reclaim Sabbath. Sunday is not a day off; it is a day of worship, an act of faith and rest in God. He will supply our needs. And as they did the emerged with fresh conviction, personal and communal renewal, faith in his promises, and songs of praise:

- "But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love..." (Neh 9:17) *Receive his merciful forgiveness.*
- "You are the Lord, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their hosts, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you!" *Join the heavens in worshipping him.*
- "But now for a brief moment favor has been shown by the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant and to give us a secure hold within his holy place, that our God may brighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our slavery. (Ez 9:8) *God grant us a little reviving*

Oh that God would grant us a little reviving in our faith, out of our consumerism and busyness. If we put rebuilding before renewal, our plans before God's providence, we will be unhappy and worn out. We will withdraw from God's mission to become whiny, sickly consumers or simple citizens who are adrift from our Creator and Redeemer. Apart from living in the constant flow of gospel renewal through prayer, meditation, fasting, confession, repentance, and faith we will fall into despair or drivenness. We will despair over the slow change in rebuilding our city or we will be so driven that rebuilding will become more important than being renewed by God. So, search your heart. Where do you need God's forgiveness (citizen or exile)? Where do you need his grace? Where do you need his reviving? May God brighten our dull eyes with the light of knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ.