

Return from Exile

Introduction to the Book of Ezra

Today we are starting a new sermon series called *Renewal: Returning from Exile*. This series is based on the book of *Ezra*, one of the last historical books in the Old Testament, located just after 2 Chronicles and before Nehemiah. Ezra was a scribe that led a renewal movement among the people of God as they returned from exile to their Jewish homeland. The book actually falls into two halves—*rebuilding* and *renewal*. The first six chapters focus on rebuilding Jerusalem and the Jewish way of life. The last three chapters focus on spiritual and covenantal renewal with God. If you're in need of renewal, if you are in a dry season of life, or even if you're not, this will be a good series for you. See, we all need renewal. We all wake up with our affections and thoughts running in the opposite direction from God. Somehow we've been tricked into thinking that what we really need is what we don't have—a better marriage, a better job, better looks, better friends, better circumstances; but that simply isn't true. What we need is precisely what God offers. This morning I'd like to just introduce you to Ezra and where we are going. Some historical background and theological foreground. What is an exile? What's happening in the story? Where is it going? The background, foreground, and over the next 10 weeks we will fill out the details.

Babylonian Exile

The end of 2 Chronicles describes the fall of the Southern kingdom of Israel, Judah, in 586 BC. Just two centuries earlier, the Northern kingdom, Israel, fell to the Assyrians in 722. Both defeats led to exile, a deportation of the Jews from their homeland into the land of their enemies. We're told that the king of the Chaldeans (Babylonians), Nebuchadnezzar, was the one that conquered the Southern kingdom. The scene was horrific. They burned the house of God, the temple, broke down the city wall, burned all its palaces and destroyed Jerusalem, the epicenter of Jewish life, faith, and culture. The temple was razed to its foundation. The holy items used in the temple were stolen. And the cream of Jewish society, what we might call Creatives, were exiled to Babylon to become servants in a pagan empire. Nebuchadnezzar's approach to conquering was to take the best people and relocate them to the center of his kingdom, enriching and strengthening his own rule. The journey from Jerusalem was long and arduous. Their home for the next 70 years would be the home of their enemies, where everything was foreign—food, language, custom, and religion. Exiled in Babylon, they lost almost everything that made them Jewish—the Temple, the Land, and Torah. We are told that when they arrived, they sat down by the rivers of Babylon and wept (Ps. 137:1). Families torn apart, culture ripped away, and exile to a city that is repeatedly associated with evil, idolatry, pride, and judgment. Why? They knew why...

Covenant

The Israelites were exiled because they rebelled against God and broke covenant with him. In the ancient Near East, a covenant was a formal *relationship* set up between two parties. These covenants or treaties were typically created between a conquering king and his subjects or vassal. The covenant structures varied, but Scott Hafemann (*God of Promise in the Life of Faith*)

has helpfully identified three common, primary elements: 1) Covenant Provision 2) Covenant Conditions, and 3) Covenant Promises (positive or negative). Provision, Conditions, and Promise. The **Provision** was a brief history of what the king did to establish the relationship. In the case of Israel, God's provision was his exodus rescue of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. This turning point in the history of Israel is referred to over and over throughout the Bible (Ex 19:4; 20:2; Josh 24; Jer 31:31-34). Without this provision, there would be no Israel-God relationship. In redeeming grace, God establishes this relationship, which leads to the covenant **Conditions**. Conditions are what must be met to preserve the covenant relationship. With Israel, the conditions were contained in the Torah, a mix of ceremonial, civil, and moral instructions that were summed up in loving God and loving neighbor. In turn, these conditions led to covenant **Promises**, which were positive (blessings) or negative (curses), depending on whether or not Israel kept the covenant Conditions. God's redeeming Provision leads to covenant Conditions which lead to covenant Promises. In Deuteronomy (which is one long covenant), chapters 27-28 details a long list of blessings and curses promised to Israel, depending on how they respond to him. The blessings were utopian, paradisaical, and the curses were dystopian, apocalyptic. Keeping covenant with God could be incredibly rewarding or punishing. So, the Jews had been rescued from Egypt (Provision), been given the Torah to guide them (Conditions), and promised reward or punishment (Promise) depending on their response to God's gracious covenant.

Return from Exile

Guess what they chose? Yep, they snubbed God's provision, they broke the covenant conditions by rejecting God's teaching, worshipping idols, and engaging in all sorts of immoralities and injustices. As a result, the covenant curses fell upon them, which included the destruction of their towns and cities, sickness and disease, and a scattering of the people. In a word—*Exile*. Israel and Judah rejected God's provision, broke his conditions, and bore his curse. Stripped of everything they end up in Babylon, where God would graciously rescue them yet again, restoring them back to the Land, the Temple, and Torah. How? In keeping with a prophecy by Jeremiah (29:10), King Nebuchadnezzar is conquered by Persian king Cyrus. Cyrus' political philosophy is very different from old Neb. Instead of hoarding Creatives, Cyrus releases all the exiles and tells them to go back to their lands, worship their gods, and carry on in their cultures. He appoints governors to oversee them to retain his rule over them, but allows them to flourish in order to unite his empire. Israel is no exception. In Ezra 1:2 he proclaims: *"Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel- he is the God who is in Jerusalem."* And so a steady stream of exiles made their way back to Jerusalem.

Rebuilding Israel

Ezra was arrived a few years after the first wave around 458, followed by Nehemiah in 445. Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book, divided into two in the 4th century, due to their differences in perspective and central character. Reading them together is helpful because it fills out the picture of what happened when Israel returned from Babylonian exile to their

Jewish homeland. In Ezra we see the temple rebuilt and the Torah recovered. In Nehemiah, the walls and city of Jerusalem are rebuilt. Both of these books focus on rebuilding and renewal. These leaders were spiritual and cultural architects, leading Israel out of exile into personal, spiritual, and cultural renewal. As we press into Ezra, we'll discover that the first six chapters are oriented towards *rebuilding Jewish life and culture* and the last three chapters are focused more on *renewing the Jewish faith and worship*. In chapters 1-6, we observe God sovereignly stirring kings, prophets, priests, craftsmen, and artists to return to Jerusalem and begin rebuilding their way of life and the temple of God. **As they rebuild, they encounter pagan support, pagan opposition, and pagan indifference.** The Persians, the Babylonians, and the Samaritans contribute to the cost of rebuilding Jerusalem and the Temple. They give of their gold, silver, livestock, and all kinds of cultural goods in order to see the Jews flourish in their homeland. They flourish with the help of other peoples and cultures. Remarkable. Is this right? Should they accept help from the world in doing God's work? Shouldn't they quarantine themselves from pagan money and culture? We'll see. There was also *pagan opposition*. The Israelites are forced to stop the rebuilding, political maneuvers work against them, neighboring tribes mock them. They suffer as they rebuild. Is this suffering a sign of God being against them? How should they respond to pagan politics and opposition in doing God's work? Then there's the pagan indifference. As the temple altar is rebuilt, the foundation laid, and sacrifice and worship resumes, the pagans show no interest at all. In renewing their covenant relationship with God, do the Israelites possess some responsibility to evangelize their neighbors? In receiving forgiveness and rejoicing in worship, should they not be compelled to share their hope in God? Pagan support, pagan opposition, and pagan indifference all in the first six chapters of rebuilding. How should Israel respond? How should we respond to the world around us? To worldly support, worldly opposition, and worldly indifference? Who are we when the world cheers, when the world persecutes, when the world blows us off? Who are you? Where is your identity when Austinites like you, when Austinites ridicule you, when Austinites don't seem to care about you? Does your identity rise and fall with the support and opposition of your fellow citizens or is it found somewhere else? What so secures your identity, that you can welcome support, winsomely endure opposition, and lovingly serve the indifferent? What we will see as Ezra unfolds is that while our identity is securely, wonderfully, redemptively rooted in Jesus as our messiah and king, our roles change. Sometimes we are to be fellow **citizens**, sharing the same city, cultural goods and values, experiencing *worldly support*. Other times we are to be **exiles** in our own city, a peculiar, holy, God-worshipping people, facing *worldly indifference*. And sometimes we look more like **missionaries**, persecuted, ridiculed, and prophetic. Carrying on God's work in God's way through God's word, not swerving from the truth, offering the hope of the gospel regardless of the response. *Worldly opposition*. As True Israel, as the Church, as disciples of Jesus we are called to live out our identity in Christ through these three overlapping roles of Citizen, Exile, and Missionary. But how do we do it? What will keep us from hiding behind "exile", constantly playing "citizen", or becoming Bible-thumping missionaries?

Renewal in Ezra

Renewal. Gospel Renewal. In chapters 7-10 of Ezra, we discover how the Jews recovered their identity, not merely as Jews but as the people of God, as people in covenant relationship with

YHWH. In chapter 7, Ezra returns from exile to Jerusalem. As a scribe, he was highly educated and possessed a variety of skills. It is likely that he served in the Persian royal court as an advisor and exemplary citizen. Many scribes were lawyers, interpreting important political documents. Ezra also served as a teacher and transcriber of the Torah. When he returned to Jerusalem, he called people back to observing the Torah, to repentance from intermarrying, and to fasting and prayer. As both exile and missionary, he ushered in a renewal of faith and obedience among his people. How did he do it? Three things: the Word, Repentance, and Prayer. These three elements of devotion to God were instrumental in moving Israel from rebuilding to renewal. Regarding the Word, "Ezra set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel" (7:10). If you are struggling in your roles as Citizen, Exile, and Missionary, and we all do don't we, leaning towards one or the other. Why? Perhaps it is because our identity is misplaced. Perhaps your heart isn't set on God's Word but on man's word. You fear worldly opposition, criticism. You find yourself worrying over what others say about you, what they think of you, instead of resting in what God thinks of you. [Barton Springs] Are we spending too much time in our role as citizens, so much that exile and missionary are barely visible? Or maybe you're a bad citizen. You hide behind your spirituality and fail to serve the city, to contribute to human flourishing. If this is you, don't stay there. Ask yourself why. Why are you consumed with worldly support, with being a citizen at the expense of being an exile? What is the lie are you believing? What about **Exile**? Are we hungering for real encounters with God, so much that we set not only our hearts, but we devote our minds to the study of God's word? Are we so reliant upon the provision of God's redeeming grace that we can't help but obey, keep his covenant conditions? Are we so enthralled by the prospect of his blessings and glory that we live a life of holiness and pleasing obedience to God? Or are you afraid of being peculiar, holy, afraid people being indifferent to you, concerned that people won't think you are cool or that you fit in. Guess what? You don't fit in, you shouldn't fit in. You're an exile in a foreign land, a citizen of the heavenly city, and your life should reflect the holiness of your God. What about **Missionary**? Are you bold and risk-taking, do you take the eternal predicament of everyone around you that you are compelled to pray for them, to share the good news of the gospel with them, or are you simply content to be a public citizen and a peculiar exile? Why? What lie might you be believing? Ezra was serious about all three. He pressed into the covenant provision of God's grace, in order to lead his people into renewal. He remarks: "*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*" (Ezra 9:8). God is graciously disposed to brighten our dull eyes, to satisfy our hunger, to revive our complacent faith...and he has given us his Word, Repentance, and Prayer as means of grace to that end. And as we press into grace with Ezra, we'll find that his return from exile is a type, a pattern of the exile that Jesus would enter and escape on our behalf. We will discover that the solution to our struggle and apathy is not merely to rebuild but to be renewed, not according to the old covenant but according to the new.