

## The Gospel of Ezra

Today I'd like us to wrap up Ezra. Ezra is a book that chronicles Israel's return from Babylonian exile to Jerusalem. As we worked through each of the ten chapters, we have seen three main roles for Israel—Citizen, Exile, and Missionary. Over the next couple of months we are devoting an entire sermon series to Mission/Missionary. This morning lets consider citizen and exile. Did you notice that sometimes the role of citizen (public servant), and exile (peculiar saint) are at odds? To be a good citizen is to place yourself alongside other citizens (Austinite). But to be a good exile is to stick out among other citizens (Christian). As citizens we *share* certain values (public good), but as exiles we don't share values (holiness). How do we reconcile these differences? This morning, I'd like us to consider these differences. How do we reconcile them?

### Citizens: Rebuilding with the World

Over the past few months, we've seen that the ten chapters of Ezra fall naturally into two sections: (1-6) *Rebuilding* and (7-10) *Renewal*. The rebuilding starts off with chapter 1, where Cyrus, king of Persia, releases Israel from exile to make the 70 mile trek across modern day Iran to resettle and rebuild Jerusalem. After 70 years of exile, this hopeful, rag-tag remnant arrives ready to reconstruct their city—physically, socially, culturally, and spiritually. In chapters 1-2 we see Israel *rebuilding with the world*. They begin work on the temple foundation with the help of the pagans. Now is this what you would expect? Israel working with their enemies, receiving money from them? It's interesting that they do not *rebuild against the world*, against their pagan rulers and neighbors, like so many Christians do today. They work with them. This is so unlike a lot of Christians today, isn't it? As they live in the city, they define themselves (ourselves) by what we are not, what we are against, *not* what we are for. This is especially true in Texas, where Christians tend to define themselves as: anti-Democrat, Anti-Obama (because he is the anti-Christ), anti-environment, anti-gay, anti-alcohol, anti-... What downers. What un-fun neighbors. We create a separate sub-culture of our own (which is too often inferior) by putting the word "Christian" in front of our politics, sexuality, music, film, literature, and art. Why? To make it abundantly clear to everyone else that we are not "worldly." That we don't build cities with the world, we build cities in spite of the world. A city of separation, self-righteousness, and judgment. We are all too glad to create and Us/Them mentality, which communicates the subtle and sometimes blatant message—we are conservative and you are liberal; we are right and you are wrong; we are saints and you are sinners. But what do we see Israel doing? They didn't choose this path, at least not entirely. To a significant degree, they avoided the *Us/Them* mentality by partnering with their non-Jewish neighbors to rebuild the temple and the city of Jerusalem. A city that would enrich the surrounding economy and strengthen the Persian empire. Instead of defining themselves as the anti-worldly, they worked with the world. They *embraced* their role as *fellow citizens* in the empire seeking the public good. Recall this is something they did when in captivity. They sought the shalom/wholeness of Babylon when they were in exile (Jer 29:11)! They had established such a good reputation, been such good citizens, that not only the Persian government but the surrounding neighbors of both Babylon and Jerusalem contributed to the costs for rebuilding the city. As Citizens, *Israel rebuilt with the world*.

## Exiles: Rebuilding Without the World

But in chapter three, we see a different side of Israel. They rebuild *without the world*. There are some things they will not do with the world, intermarry, worship. They focus on their unique calling to worship and obey the one, true Creator God-YHWH. They do this without the world. Even amidst persecution (3:3), they press on and complete the altar and foundation of the temple to worship God. They celebrate without the world in festival—singing, eating, sacrificing, and shouting for joy. With sacrifices in place and the temple under construction, Israel can resume their calling to be a peculiar, obedient, holy, people. And as such be a light to the nations around them. But the nations don't take too kindly to Israel's exclusive worship. In chapter 4, they try to join the rebuilding and worship, but Israel refuses. Why? I thought they were an inclusive people, a light to the nations? Well, as it turns out, these nations weren't really eager to worship YHWH with Israel; they wanted to trip them up. Any genuine desire to worship YHWH was on their own terms, not God's terms. They wanted to add YHWH to their already existing pantheon of gods, making one among many. But this kind of inclusivism would not wash with Israel. YHWH had called them to worship him and him alone. YHWH's claim was not "one god among many," but the one true Creator God. The nations were trying to force YHWH into their own belief system, a relativist system. But God had called Israel to be peculiar saints who worshipped and obeyed him alone. After all, if he is the Creator God, then it would be absurd for him to capitulate worship to lesser deities. How do you think the nations responded? Well, they showed their true colors. It wasn't worship they were after; it was power. And Israel refused to let these power hungry pagans contaminate their faith. The peoples of the land became adversaries instead of neighbors. Chp 4 tells us that they attempted to discourage, frustrate, and persecute the Israelites. They even bribed counselors against them and took political action, writing a letter to the new king of Persia saying that the Jews were "rebuilding a rebellious and wicked city" (4:12, 15). You can imagine the fall out. The king issued a moratorium on rebuilding which lasted ten years. The nations were only too glad to enforce the king's edict. Although they had returned from exile, it's as if Israel remained exiles in their own land, spiritual exiles persecuted by the world, peculiar saints who stuck out in their culture, because of their exclusivist, peculiar way of life. As exiles, they obeyed, worshipped, and *suffered*. They were sneered at because of their worship. Rejected because of their exclusive claims. Ostracized because of their peculiar, holy character. They worked without the world, not out of spite, but out of integrity. And suffered for their beliefs.

Like Israel, Christians are called to be citizens *and* exiles. Sometimes working with the world and other times working without the world. God calls us to be Citizens that seek the good of the city and Exiles that obey and worship him, *public servants* and *peculiar saints*. How can we be both? They seem like opposites, two ends of a spectrum. On the citizen end, we are *inclusive citizens*, committed to the good of the city with our fellow citizens. We "rebuild" with them; we share culture with them—Social Service, Arts, Dining, Technology, and so on. We are inclusive, including them in common culture and purpose. But on the other end, we are *exclusive exiles*, committed to obeying and worshipping God. We "rebuild" without them; we refuse to share things, like certain cultural values—Consumerism, Individualism, Sexual ethics. We refuse to share certain beliefs—Humanism, Pantheism, Relativism, Buddhism, Islam, and so on. In fact, we don't even share the ultimate view of the common good. Austin thinks what the city needs

most is creative, diverse, spiritual relativism (Keep Austin Weird). And while we agree to a degree, what we ultimately think the city needs is not creative, religious relativism but *the Gospel of Jesus Christ*. This is not popular. Citizen cool. Exile not cool. We are too weird, too exclusive, for many Austinites. As a result, we will suffer as exiles. We will be ostracized. Citizens *and* Exiles? Can you feel the tension? How do we remain faithful to both? What do we do? Here's what we do. Like Israel, we respond by *embracing the suffering that comes with exile*. Obey, worship, serve, and embrace the suffering, and as you do, don't run from Christ to the refuge of the city, but remain in Christ. As citizens we relentlessly pursue the good of this city, through the Gospel, which at times makes us unpopular exiles. We refuse to lump Jesus in with all the other gods of Austin. We remain faithful, obedient worshippers of King Jesus.

### **The Gospel of Ezra and the Story of Humanity**

Why? You are telling me to do so because I am a Christina and to be Christian is to be both citizen and exile, but why do I have to go the way of exile, embrace suffering, insist on the exclusive claims of Jesus? Why embrace the way of citizen and exile? **Because we really love this city and because we love Jesus more than we love the city.** In a city as incredible as Austin, there is a lot of city-olatry, worship of the city. We can't go a day without hearing how great Austin is, but what about Jesus, the Creator of the World? Austin gets more fame than Jesus! We don't worship the city; we worship Christ. What our city needs most, is not infatuated citizens, but citizen-exiles who lovingly insist on the exclusive, redemptive power of the Gospel. Why is the Gospel what this city needs most? **Because the Gospel is the most honest, most compelling, most complete rendering of the Story of humanity.** What do I mean? The story of humanity is actually the story of Israel told and *retold* over and over again throughout history. The story of man begins with Adam, who falls from grace in the Garden of Eden by disobeying his King and Creator. This is *Sin or the Fall*. Adam's sin affects everything—creation, marriage, culture, city building, and relationship with God. What happens next? *Exile*. Adam is righteously banished from God's presence. He falls from true humanity, from relating with his Creator, he is warped human, mixed with sin and destined to roam the earth broken and longing for *Restoration*. The story of humanity is represented in Adam: Sin-Exile-Restoration. The story Adam is recycled with Israel. Israel falls from grace by disobeying God and worshipping a Golden Calf and various gods along the way. *Sin*. As a result, they are eventually banished from their Eden/Promised Land. *Exiled* to Babylon, where they pine for *restoration*. Sin-Exile-Restoration. This sin-exile-restoration story is repeated throughout the rest of history. **Our own individual stories recapitulate this grand narrative of sin (fall from true humanity), exile (from God's presence), restoration (longing for redemption and reunion with God).** In fact, this basic plotline is so common we see it in fiction and film all the time. Take *District 9* for example, Peter Jackson's film about alien refugees in South Africa. The film tells the story of Wilkus, an MNU field operative commissioned with the task of relocating a large number of aliens from District 9 to a more remote location. In the process, Wilkus contracts an alien virus that begins to change his DNA. He accidentally triggers a black spray from an alien canister, which transforms his human biology into alien biology. Wilkus's *Falls* from true humanity. As his DNA changes, his arm transforms into alien flesh. He is hunted by fellow humans, ostracized from his family, and forced to leave the city, seeking refuge in District 9, the alien compound. Wilkus is *Exiled*. The rest of the movie chronicles his search for *Restoration*, to

become truly human once again. He longs for restoration, to regain his true humanity, to be restored in his relationships. The Sin-Exile-Restoration storyline is a human storyline. Like Wilkus, we all have fallen from true humanity, we are born into an altered, warped state, infected with sin. We are exiled from one another and from our Creator, and we are in desperate need of redemption. Like Wilkus, we long to be restored, to be redeemed. How can the human cycle of sin-exile-restoration be broken? The Gospel is God's answer. It is the good news that God in Christ has come to rescue us from sin and exile in order to restore us to true humanity, to know, enjoy, and worship Him. But how? How can our story be redeemed? The hope of Israel was in a man who would come and enter their story, a faithful Israelite, a second Adam, who would break the cycle of sin-exile-restoration by succeeding where they failed, obeying where they disobeyed. This man was the promised messiah (Greek=Christ). The messiah was promised to come and rescue them from sin and exile and permanently restore them to true humanity and true communion with their Creator. This man was Jesus. Jesus did not claim to be a good teacher. He did not claim to be a wise philosopher or a moral example. He claimed to be the messiah, the one promised to deliver humanity and Israel from their sin and exile. He made an exclusive claim. He does not allow us to add him to our pantheon of gods, to be placed on the religious shelf with Ghandi, Mohammad, and Buddha. No, Jesus claimed much more than peace-maker, prophet, and enlightened One. He made the exclusive claim to be God, a God who humbled himself to lift us up, a God who entered our story as man, not to be moral, wise, or interesting, but in order to bear our sin and exile, as a substitute, and restore us. Jesus is so gracious, so merciful, so loving that he entered our messy, sinful, warped, depraved story in order to suffer for our sin, endure our exile in his death, and restore us through his sin, death, and evil defeating resurrection. He is the true Israelite. The second Adam. We need not linger like Wilkus wondering when Christopher will return to restore our humanity. Christopher has already returned. And all we need to do to be restored is to acknowledge our fall from true humanity, to be honest about our sin and exile before a holy God, and embrace the loving restoration offered by our messiah, our savior, Christ. Will you turn to him, not just once, but over and over for a lifetime? Turning from sin and turning to Christ. This is grace. This is the gospel, the good news that Jesus has entered our story, defeated sin, death, and evil through his death and resurrection, and is making all things new! If we do not make this exclusive claim, exiles, we sell our city short. If we refuse to embrace the great sacrifice of Christ for our sin and exile, we will not enter restoration. To be Christian, is to be an exile, a peculiar saint with exclusive claims for the everlasting good of the city. The Book of Ezra reminds us of the story of humanity—sin/exile/restoration—and the story of humanity is the story of Israel. A story in desperate need of redemption, of a messiah who will rescue and restore us. But Ezra also reminds us of God's commitment to renewing humanity. Through the means of grace in his Word (7), Prayer (8) Holiness (9) and Repentance (10), God deals mercifully with us, to restore us. If this story is true, then it makes all the difference whether or not we believe it. How do we reconcile citizens and exile? We embrace the suffering of Christ by seeking the good of the city at all costs. We bring this great news into our homes, city groups, neighborhoods, 6<sup>th</sup> street, Uganda, and the whole world. Tell the story. Prove the story is true through our citizenship and our exile. Embrace the suffering that comes with believing Jesus is the Christ, and giving our city what it needs most. The city-renewing, humanity-restoring gospel.