

*Ezra-Nehemiah: Return and Restoration*

“The Gracious Hand of God”

Introduction: A children’s author by the name of Richard Scarry wrote a book called “Cars and Trucks and Things that Go.” It was quite a favorite in our house for many years when our daughters were little. It features a family of pigs, going on a picnic, making their way by means of various vehicles and through various adventures. Each page is chocked full of pictures of these adventures. In addition, on each page the reader is asked to locate an emoji like figure known as Goldbug. “Where’s Goldbug?” we would ask the girls as we turned each page. And they would try to find him and point him out, a task which brought them much joy, and of which they never seemed to tire!

In like fashion, as we have finished 6 chapters of an OT book called Ezra, sandwiched by a look at the prophet Jeremiah and last week Haggai, well might we ask, “Where’s Ezra?!” For as of yet, the man after whom this book is named, and who probably wrote it, has not appeared. But this morning, in Ezra 7, Ezra arrives! It turns out that Ezra had remained in Persia when the first wave of exiles returned to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel, as we have seen, led the rebuilding of the temple. Now, some sixty years after the temple has been completed, “after these things,” as our text will put it, Ezra comes to the holy city leading a second wave of returnees.

So, now that we’ve found him, just who is this Ezra? What is his role? How does God use him in the restoration of the community of his people? How does he challenge and encourage us in our own life as a community, seeking to come back together out of the “exile” of pandemic? [READ]

I. A Man of Many Roles

A. Ezra, we want to note, is a man of many roles. The first thing the text tells us is that he is a priest. But not just any priest. We might tremble, or chuckle, or even just yawn at this list of strange sounding names we just read, but to the ancients of that day this list was like a fanfare of trumpets signaling Ezra’s importance. This wasn’t just any Ezra; this was the Ezra who came from the most significant genetic line in Israel. He was a descendent of the very first and chief priest, a man named Aaron, brother of Moses.

B. Now, as we think about it, this link actually tells us more about the faithfulness of God than it does about Ezra. For, this link would’ve been very important for a people seeking to reconnect with their history and establish their identity. What story were they living in? To be sure, as this little community struggled to establish itself on the site of their ruined city and temple, they looked nothing like the kingdom of Judah in its glory years, and certainly nothing like the mini-empire of Solomon’s united kingdom. They were still a tiny little group living in the backwaters of the Persian empire. But they were also still the remnant, the covenant, missional people of God, through whom God had promised to bring blessing to the world. By sending this Ezra, God was affirming this, reassuring them that there was a connection with the past. God was demonstrating that he had not forgotten his people, or his purposes, that even now, after 60 years of relative silence, God was still working his purposes out, through them.

Illustration: How do you deal with long periods of silence, periods when it may seem as if God has done, or is doing, nothing to advance his kingdom, when, to put a face on it, Jesus seems to be asleep in the

back of the boat while the storm rages? Remember what his disciples cried out when they woke him up? “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?” (Mk 4:35-41). Go back 60 years and you land in 1960. It’s a decade which launched a turbulent and highly transitional time in our nation. After 60 years of what seems like the waning influence of the church in our culture, some might accuse God of being asleep, of not caring. But the biblical record indicates, like we see Ezra reveal to us, that despite long periods of what seem like silence on God’s part, he has not forgotten. He cares. He is faithful. Will we trust him? Ezra, in his role as priest, son of Aaron, is a measure of God’s faithfulness.

C. A second thing we hear about Ezra is that he was “a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the LORD the God of Israel, had given.” And, that Ezra was well versed because he “had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees ...” (vv. 6b, 10). The Law of Moses here most likely stands for the Pentateuch, or first five books of our OT. It was understood to be the very authoritative words of God, given through his servant Moses. These words revealed the character and person of God, established the identity of God’s people, and showed them the very best way to live. As Moses explains to the Israelites when they were on the brink of entering the Promised Land, for the first time:

These are the commands, decrees and laws the LORD your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the LORD your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. [Dt. 6:1-2]

Ezra, who we might understand to be a kind of second Moses, was being called by God to do the very same thing. This community may have rebuilt the temple, but if the hearts of the people weren’t right toward God and others, it would remain just an empty pile of stones.

D. Significantly, Israel had been down this hard road before. Prior to the exile to Babylon, God had instructed Jeremiah to stand at the gate of the temple, and there proclaim:

Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the LORD. This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. Do not trust in deceptive words and say, ‘This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!’ If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever.” [Jer. 7:1-7]

Sadly, Israel did not listen to these words and for 70 years were forced to live in exile. Now that they had returned home, for restoration of their community to take place, to become formed and shaped for the mission of God, God’s word needed to be studied, lived, and taught. Ezra, as one who had studied God’s word, who had allowed it to form and shape him, and who sought to teach others, came to take the lead in that task, and to challenge and call us to make sure we’re doing the same. True, godly community cannot happen without the study of God’s word, without putting it into practice, and without passing it on to others. It is part of the warp and woof of who we’re called to be.

E. Finally, we read that “the king had granted [Ezra] everything he asked . . .” (7:6c). This tells us, along with the rest of chapter 7, which is comprised of a letter the Persian king, Artaxerxes, wrote to Ezra to take with him, that Ezra had some sort of official role in the Persian court, one which enabled him to have the ear of the king. “Secretary of Jewish Affairs” is how Ezra’s role might have been described. And the letter tells us that not only was Ezra sent by the king to take funds for the operation of the temple (vv. 15-22), he was also sent to check out how the Jews who had returned were living, and to set up magistrates and judges to administer the region according to the Law of the LORD (vv. 14, 25). On the part of Artaxerxes, this amounted to what one commentator calls “pragmatic piety.” Dealing with a revolt at that time from the nation of Egypt, the king saw the Law of the God of the Israelites as being good for helping to keep life orderly, which in turn would help bring stability to that part of his kingdom. He also had a desire, like we saw in Cyrus before him, to curry the favor of as many gods as possible, and so appease any wrath they might have toward him (v. 23). And just to really remain on the good side of this god, Artaxerxes instructed that all the temple officials could live tax-free, in hopes, most likely, that they would favor him with their sacrifices and not lead the people against him (v. 24).

F. While all of this seems like expert political maneuvering on the part of the Persian king, Ezra sees things differently. In his words: [7:27-28]

Praise be to the LORD, the God of our ancestors, who has put it into the king’s heart to bring honor to the house of the LORD in Jerusalem in this way and who has extended his good favor to me before the king and his advisers and all the king’s powerful officials. Because the hand of the LORD my God was on me, I took courage and gathered leaders from Israel to go up with me.

Ezra is given the sight to see the gracious hand of God behind the king’s actions. It gives him the courage to move forward and seek to bring restoration to this community.

May his courage give us courage. May he help us to see God’s faithfulness, even when the wait seems long, even when it seems to us like God is sleeping! May he help us to trust in the formative power of God’s word for our community such that we will seek to study it, do it, and teach it to others.