

RETURNING FROM EXILE – PART THREE

(Ezra 7-10)

Lesson 57 – Part 3

I was in the middle of what I still consider the toughest trial in my courtroom career. The trial was grueling in terms of time, eight weeks away from home. When all was done, our firm expended over 45,000 hours of attorney time in a case spanning over a decade. The case had cost millions of dollars to develop, and the defendant did not take any of it lying down.

The defendant company was an international behemoth that had out spent us by multiples. It had retained the world's largest and best law firms, with more lawyers than I could count. The lawyers had impeccable credentials and skills. The work ethic was intense and almost intimidating. There was a good bit of media attention, which added to the pressure. It was like a hot cauldron that was constantly on the border of boiling over and burning me and everyone nearby.

In the middle of the trial, I had a communication from my son, an email I caught one morning. Will was in England, but he sent me an email to listen to the song, "My Deliverer" by Rich Mullins. I downloaded the song immediately and began listening on my drive to the courthouse. The song has a bit of a haunting melody in the verses, and the lyrics are not always plainly understood, but the refrain that is echoed repeatedly (17 by my count) is direct:

My Deliverer is coming; my Deliverer is standing by.

The repeated phrase is punctuated by several assurances and averments of faith. The first is,

He will never break his promise; he has written it upon the sky.

The second time the added profession is,

I will never doubt his promise; though I doubt my heart, I doubt my eyes.

The third and final profession is,

He will never break his promise, though the stars break faith with the sky.

My Deliverer is coming. My Deliverer is standing by! That was just what I needed to hear. That lifted my vision from my "moment" into eternity. It changed who I was and what I was doing. I was not alone; I was on mission!

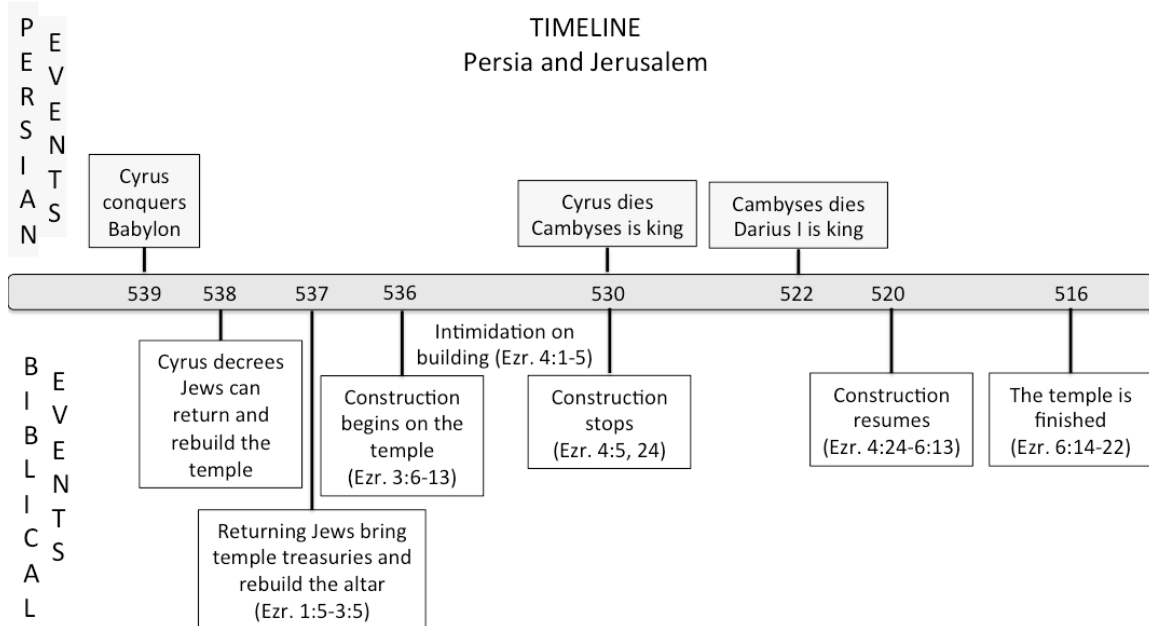
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Was it something new to me? Was it a Damascus road moment taking me into a belief that I had previously shunned? No, it wasn't. I was a man of faith before. But this was the word I needed to redirect my attention. It is too easy to get caught up in the push and pull of each day and the day's requirements, and to lose sight of eternity and the Eternal One. This was not some way of escaping life's demands; it was a jolt of reality that placed life's demands into their real perspective. It became a time of courage, recognizing that the hand of God the Deliverer was upon the world and his children. In that, there was a serenity and sufficiency equal to any task.

I thank God for my son and for that exchange. It changed me. As our study returns its focus onto the Jews' return to their Promised Land, we finish the story of Ezra, and the jolt that brought his life into perspective, setting him on mission to not only do his job, but also to focus on who he was doing it for.

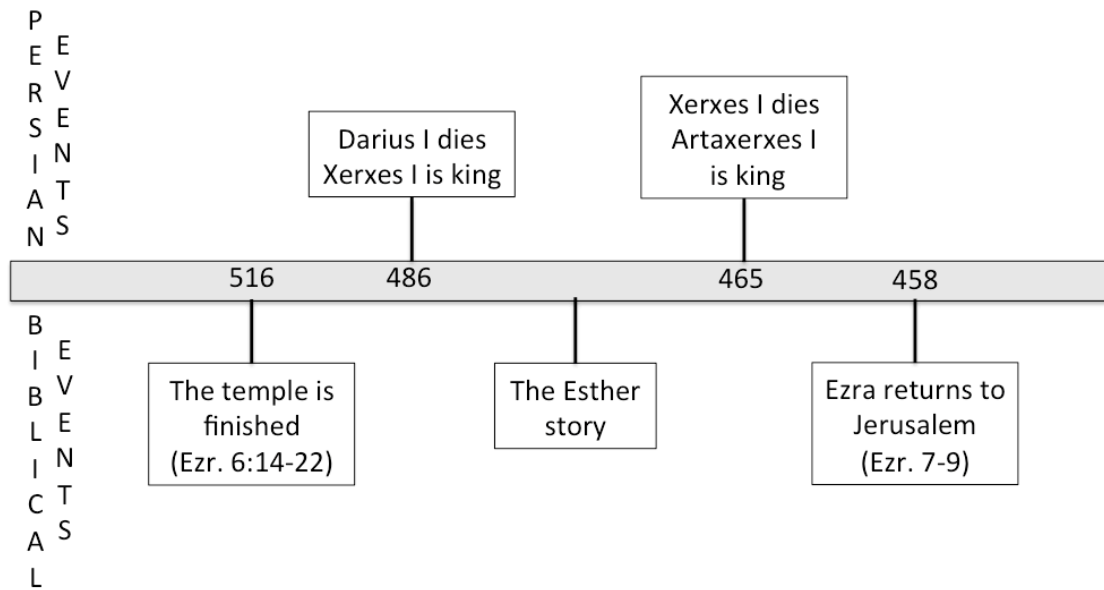
BACKGROUND

We last left the study of the Jews at a time when a number choose to return from the Babylonian exile to Jerusalem and the surrounding land. Our study focused on the first six chapters in the book of Ezra. We covered the timeline below:



Our study ended with the completion of the second temple in 526 BC. (Scholars call this “the second temple” to distinguish it from the temple of Solomon. The period from this point to the temple’s destruction in 70 AD is called in scholastic

circles the “Second Temple Period.”) These activities, while recorded in the book of Ezra, actually occurred before Ezra came on the scene. Ezra makes a personal appearance on the pages of Israel’s history in Ezra chapter seven. Our timeline fast-forwards from the reign of Darius I and completion of the temple in 516 into the 400’s. The remaining events in Ezra take place beginning in the seventh year of the reign of the Persian king Artaxerxes I (Ezr. 7:7). Persia is still the world empire, but Greece is on the horizon, as Persia has tried repeatedly to conquer Greece, but each time without success. At this historical time, the fourth Persian king from this dynasty sat on the throne:



Around 458 BC, our study in Ezra continues. This is about 58 years after the completion of the temple, 80 years after the first wave of returning Jews under King Cyrus.

THE EZRA STORYLINE

Ezra walked onto the pages of Israel’s history at a time where a second temple had been constructed. We can assume from the preceding chapters of Ezra that sacrifices were being offered at the temple, but temple worship alone was not the “point” of Israel’s calling. Jeremiah had warned the Judeans earlier that temple worship was no magic pill:

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive

words: “This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD” (Jer. 7:3-4).

Jeremiah’s voice must have resounded loudly to those who knew it, because he had laid out the Persian conquest, the exile, and the restoration in exacting detail. History had shown the authenticity of his prophetic voice. Ezra would have been acutely aware of Jeremiah’s warnings, having studied the book (Ezr. 1:1). The cry of Jeremiah, like that of the prophets before him, was not simply a call to worship, but also a call to personal holiness.

Ezra was well suited to study Jeremiah. He was a scribe, an important official in the courts of Persia who was readily able to read and write.¹ His lineage was from the house of Aaron, making Ezra a priest. He was particularly “skilled in the Law of Moses” (Ezr. 7:6). So not only was Ezra able to read and write fluently, but he also had access to the holy writings of Israel, even though he lived in Babylon.

The Law of God was important to Ezra. As he is introduced in the historical narrative, we are told of three things that impacted the direction of his life:

For Ezra had set his heart [1] to study the Law of the LORD, and [2] to do it and [3] to teach his statutes and rules in Israel (Ezr. 7:10).²

These three motivators pushed Ezra from Babylon back to the homeland of his forefathers. They were the calling on his life prompting his return to Judea where he would live and teach God’s ways.

Ezra left Babylon for Judea with the blessings of King Artaxerxes. The king sent a letter with Ezra, which is set out in chapter seven.³ In the letter, the king pronounced his decree that Ezra was free to take with him any Jew who wished to go. In the king’s language, Ezra was not simply “going” but he was being “sent” by the king! The king and his “seven counselors” wanted Ezra to go to Jerusalem and Judah to “make inquiries” and check on whether people were living in accordance with “the Law of your God.” The king also provided a substantial amount of silver and gold, both for travelling purposes and to buy the appropriate

¹ Cline, D. J., *Ezra, Nehemiah, Ester*, (Eerdmans 1984), at 99.

² A motto and goal of the home church where these lessons are taught is to “know, grow, and go.” The idea is that believers should first know God, then grow before God, and finally go share the message of God with others. That is solidly in line with Ezra’s heart. He sought to know God through his revealed Law, to grow in his living of that, and then to go and teach it to others.

³ The letter was written in Aramaic, the official court language of the Persians. Even though most of Ezra is written in Hebrew, this letter is set out in its Aramaic original.

sacrifices to offer YHWH under the Law. The king instructed his treasurer over the land that included Judah to provide Ezra with certain supplies and funds, up to a pre-set limit, so that Ezra would be fully equipped to appease the “God of heaven,” which seems to be the name the king ascribed to YHWH. The treasurers were also instructed not to collect taxes on the priests and others who served in the temple. The final note in the king’s letter authorized Ezra to appoint magistrates and judges for the area of Judah that would administer the Law of God as Ezra saw fit (Ezr. 7:11-26).

Ezra understood that this act by the king was one that really proceeded forth from God himself:

Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king (Ezr. 7:27).

Ezra gathered up a group to accompany him on the journey, making sure he had all he needed to re-institute Torah practice in Judah.⁴ Two priests and a descendant of David joined Ezra. Ezra also selected the complete number of twelve for the member families that joined him on the venture. The trip began with a stop at a nearby river to review provisions and the trip. There, Ezra realized that he had failed to bring any Levites, so he sent a crew back to collect a number of hand-selected Levites to join the endeavor.

Once the group was all gathered together, before the journey began in earnest, Ezra proclaimed a fast by the river’s edge. The fasting was part of petitioning God for safety on the journey:

Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods (Ezr. 8:21).

In a touching way, one that shows both godly faith and human anxiety nestled right up together in an all too familiar way, Ezra explained the reasoning behind not simply asking the king for military support to ensure a safe trip:

For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king, “The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him.” So we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty (Ezr. 8:22-23).

⁴ “Torah” was the Hebrew word for the Law of Moses.

For the trip, Ezra divided the money (silver and gold) evenly among twelve leading priests and ten of their kinsmen,⁵ charging the priests and the Levites to carry and guard the treasures safely until it was re-measured out before the chief priests and Levites in Jerusalem.

Thus provisioned and cloaked in prayer for the journey, the families began their caravan of about 900 miles. The journey lasted four months (figuring a Sabbath rest each week, the caravan was averaging ten miles a day.) Once in Jerusalem, Ezra and his group waited for three days before doing anything of note.⁶ On the fourth day, the treasures were weighed to verify their safe and complete passage from the care of the priests and Levites. Sacrifices were offered for the people, and copies of the king's letters were delivered.

After this, Ezra began to assess the situation. The officials he had appointed pursuant to the king's commission carried out their charge to discern whether the people were living in accordance with the Torah law. The officials had distressing news for Ezra. The people of Israel, including the priests and Levites, had been living in relationship with pagans, allowing, if not adopting their pagan practices, and living with their women and having children. Ezra readily understood the effect of this was to remove the holiness of the Israelites as special people of God's promise to Abraham, people through whom he would bless all nations (Gen. 12:3). Significantly, many of the land's leaders were foremost in this sin.

At this point in the narrative, Ezra is speaking in first person. We hear in his own words, his reactions:

As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled (Ezr. 9:3).

Ezra was not alone in this. Others who knew the Law and feared God gathered around him. Ezra sat "appalled" until the evening, when he arose from his fast, fell upon his knees and with outstretched

שָׁמַם The Hebrew word translated "appalled" is *shamem*. It can also be translated "stunned" or "devastated." It is the word describing Tamar after she had been incestuously raped by Amnon (2 Sam. 13:20).

⁵ As we noted in the Appendix to the Daniel lesson, the Babylonians, Persians, and other Ancient Near Eastern peoples tended to view numbers for their numerical significance, even when those numbers were referencing an actual count. We see the number twelve, which symbolized fullness much like seven did, used repeatedly in Ezra's planning. He brought twelve families, divided the treasures to twelve priests for security, and the trip began on the twelfth day of the month. Once they arrived in Jerusalem, Ezra offered twelve bulls in sacrifice along with twelve male goats.

⁶ Three, as a number, carried the symbolic weight of divine completion.

hands, began to pray to YHWH. Ezra's response reflected his intimacy with the Law and history of Moses. When Moses led God's people, the twelve tribes, toward the Promised Land, the people violated the core covenants of God, worshipping a golden calf. When Moses was faced with God's proper judgment on such sin, Moses prayerfully intervened on behalf of the people. Exodus 32 tells the story of Moses beseeching God on behalf of the people. Ezra, who had led his own group of twelve families from life in a foreign land to the same Promised Land, saw the sin of the people and was similarly moved to prayerful intervention.

The prayer was blunt and touching, as Ezra identified himself among the sinners. Clearly, this was not an identification that arose from Ezra intermarrying. It was an identification arising from Ezra as one of the people, unholy as all people truly are before a perfectly righteous God:

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. From the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt (Ezr. 9:6-7).

Ezra recounted the judgments of God, but also recognized the moment of God's favor. At that moment, God allowed a remnant to return to the land, removed the bondage of slavery and by his steadfast love, granted mercy from the pagan Persian government. In response, the people brought base impurity into the Holy Land. The people returned, but immediately began the same basic lawlessness that historically led to idolatry and every other sin.

This was no small sin. It was the downfall of Solomon who,

Loved many foreign women, along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the nations concerning which the LORD had said to the people of Israel, 'You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods' (1 Kings 11:1-2).

These very same foreign groups were the women that had joined up with the Jews (Ezr. 9:1). This principle is carried throughout Scripture as even Paul warned the Corinthians,

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? (2 Cor. 6:14).

It is a simple truth that we tend to become like those we spend time around.

Ezra ended his prayer⁷ accepting God's just judgment, even as he was begging for mercy:

Behold, we are before you in our guilt, for none can stand before you because of this (Ezr. 9:15).

Ezra was weeping bitterly as he prayed. He was torn up, likely envisioning a coming purifying fire of God, as Judah had experienced earlier. Ezra was not alone in his weeping. A large group of men, women, and children came to him, and began weeping as well. One man, Shecaniah, announced the decision of the people. Having broken faith with God by joining up with foreign women, the decision was made to "put away" the foreign women and children. They took an oath to do so before Ezra.⁸

Ezra withdrew and spent the night fasting from food and water, while he was in mourning over the events. Meanwhile, a proclamation went forth that every Jew had to come before the officials and assembly within three days, or forfeit their land and their right to be Jews. The assembly happened within the three days, and the people sat in the open square trembling because of their sin. They were also trembling because of the heavy rain pouring down, as even the skies seemed to cry over the sin.

Ezra stood before the assembled and proclaimed their sin of breaking faith. He called on the people to confess their sins and to separate from foreign wives. The people agreed and pledged to do as instructed, explaining that the process would take some time and couldn't be done standing outside in the rain. The assembly was declared over, and the people worked through the officials to end the marriages.

With this restoration of purity, the book of Ezra draws to a close. Nehemiah will then pick up the narrative in our next class.

⁷ The prayer shows Ezra's intimate knowledge of the Law of Moses. His prayer is patchwork of scriptural passages, indicative of a strong working memory of the Torah.

⁸ The Hebrew here is particularly interesting. The Hebrew does not use the normal word for "marriage" or the normal word for "divorce." The Hebrew word used instead of marriage comes from the root *ysb* meaning "to dwell." Similarly, the typical Hebrew word for divorce is not used for the separation of the Hebrews from the foreign women. Instead of "divorce" (*krytwl*), Ezra uses *yz'*, meaning "to send away." It's as if these were not real marriages, but rather cohabitation agreements. Either way, the relationships were sinful and were outside the legal instructions for the Jews as God's people set apart from the nations.

CONCLUSION

Ezra is a story that conveys the lasting promises of God. His promise to Abraham exceeded the sins of Abraham's descendants. Through priests and prophets, God continually purged and edified his people, leaving a pure line that, in accord with his promise, produced a Messiah to bless the world. God the Deliverer, the faithful one, whose words never fail – He is the God who protected Ezra and the caravan. He is the God who brought a pure remnant back to Judah and Jerusalem. He is the God who kept the Messiah promise. He is the God who still proclaims himself in relationship with his people today. All the while, he continues to move history toward his promise of finality and eternity. My Deliverer is coming, my Deliverer is standing by!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“Do not trust in these deceptive words: “This is the temple of the LORD” (Jer. 7:4).*

Many of the people in Jeremiah's day and Ezra's day thought they were satisfying the Deity if they would regularly offer their sacrifices in the temple. God, to them, was some distant superman who needed adoration to either satisfy his ego or to feed his soul. Yet, God was never that way. God is not a man with super powers who needs ego boosts or some type of sacrificial nourishment. God is so beyond our understanding and imagination that we cannot begin to conceive of him in his glory. His desire is for us, his creation, to walk in his ways in fellowship with him.

There is a bit of a practical anomaly that occurs here. The more we perceive God in his true grandeur and might, the more distant and alien he seems, and the harder it is to understand that One such as He would even be aware of us, much less hold interest in us. We almost do better understanding the call of God for fellowship when we reduce God down into our frame of reference.

I suspect this is one reason for the incarnation. In Jesus, we see God living among us, talking to us, walking with us, and even shedding tears over our pain. This is almost beyond comprehension. That a God who *is God Almighty* in a big universe creating, space-time exceeding, Ancient of Days, wants the hearts and minds of each of his billions of people, all of whom he knows intimately, whether they are aware of him or not.

This then is our call: Do not minimize God, thinking him adequately pleased by some simple act of worship or some token prayer. Remember he is greater than our greatest conceptions, and he desires so much more than a token recognition. He wants us to daily walk before him, trusting in his will for our lives, and seeking to reign over us daily as Lord.

2. *“The hand of the LORD his God was on him”* (Ezr. 7:6).

As Ezra was leaving Babylon, we come across a phrase that gets repeated over and over in these chapters:

The hand of the LORD his God was on him (Ezr. 7:6).

This phrase is why the king granted Ezra’s request to return to Judea, sending treasures with him (Ezr. 7:6). It is the reason his journey was safe. (“He came to Jerusalem, for the good hand of his God was on him” Ezr. 7:9). It was the source of Ezra’s courage for the tasks at hand. (“I took courage, for the hand of the LORD my God was on me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me” Ezr. 7:28). The hand of God provided what Ezra needed when he needed it. (“And by the good hand of our God on us, they brought us a man of discretion” Ezr. 8:18). It was his testimony to others. (“For I was ashamed to ask the king for a band of soldiers and horsemen to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king, ‘The hand of our God is for good on all who seek him, and the power of his wrath is against all who forsake him’” Ezr. 8:22). It was the hand of God the Deliverer! (“Then we departed from the river Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month, to go to Jerusalem. The hand of our God was on us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy and from ambushes by the way” Ezr. 8:31).

Of course, God’s hand was never a physical appendage that reached down from the skies and adjusted life on earth like pawns on a chessboard. Instead, the “hand of God” symbolized the actions and attentions of the LORD God as he tended to the needs of his people and the plans of his promises. That hand of God is where he has engraved the names of his people (Isa. 49:16). It is the protecting hand we need. It is the hand of supply for our lives. It is the hand of our Deliverer!

3. *“Then I proclaimed a fast there...that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey”* (Ezr. 8:21).

I am touched by the fervor of Ezra. It seems easy enough to simply say a prayer for safety, knowing God hears prayer, and seeks to answer the prayers of his children. Yet Ezra, a man of God, held such conviction, that he called a fast to accompany the prayers. Nothing in the text indicates that this was some perceived self-denial ploy that would sooner obligate God to answer the prayer. It was simply an act of fervor and devotion. It reflected the deep feelings and serious nature of the need. What Ezra did was not unlike the understanding Paul reached in his life, namely that when we are weak, then God is strong (2 Cor. 13:9).

The Hebrew that is translated by the ESV as a “safe journey” literally means a “straight way” (*drk yshr*). In humility, Ezra set his requests before God. Ezra then set out on his journey, trusting God would make it straight (or safe). Ezra struck out on his journey trusting in the words of Proverbs 3:6, “Trust in the LORD with all of your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and **he will make straight your paths.**” Proverbs 3:6 uses the same word for straight (*yshr*), but instead of “path,” Proverbs 3:6 actually says, “caravan” (*'rhh*). That was the precise need for Ezra, the need for his caravan’s journey to be straight/safe. His humility was the trust and acknowledgement of Proverbs 3. Where does this leave me before God? Hopefully seeking the humility to lean on him, to seek him, to entrust him with my life inspired to find a measure of fervor beyond that I have experienced before!