



Ezra 1:1-11
Ezra: Rebuilding
“We’re All in This Together”

Rev. Brian North
September 26th, 2021

This morning we start a new series of messages in the Old Testament book of Ezra. Ezra and the book of Nehemiah cover the rebuilding of Israel, particularly Jerusalem and its wall and the Temple, after their exile to Assyria and then Babylon when Babylon conquered Assyria. So, it’s about their return to their homeland. And in this series, we will be learning about the rebuilding process that they went through – how it started, how it got carried to fruition, who helped make it happen, and so forth. If you have any sense of rebuilding or starting over going on in your life – marriage that needs some rebuilding, rebuilding a relationship with someone else, maybe you’re new to the area and you’re rebuilding your whole life – anything along those lines, then there will be principals and things that come out of this series that will be applicable, whether you’re experiencing that now, or might in the future.

But first I want to set the stage for the book of Ezra with some background information. As I said: **The setting is the return of the people of Israel to their homeland.** This happened over several decades. In fact, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah together cover about 100 years of history, starting in 538 B.C. That’s where Ezra starts. Having been driven from the land previously because of their sin, they need to learn once again how to live in covenant with God. They must revive a spiritual commitment to serve God alone.

In fact: **The primary theme of Ezra is faithfulness to the Lord, both in keeping the Mosaic law (7:6) and in worship.** That phrase “Mosaic Law” should be familiar to you from our summer series on Exodus. Another name for it is “The Covenant” or “The Old Covenant” because of the New Covenant that Jesus established. Because of his concern about worship, Ezra stresses the importance of rebuilding the temple, whereas Nehemiah tends to focus on the rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem.

So, Ezra calls the people back to covenant loyalty and obedience to the Mosaic law. The book rejoices in God’s provision in returning them to the land, rebuilding the temple, and calling his people back to himself. The book also warns against falling away again through sin and against serving other

gods. It encourages persevering in hope, repenting in humility, and living in obedience to God. So, these are additional points of emphasis that you will find as you read through the book of Ezra.

I should note that the book of Ezra never declares its author (this is not unusual – it’s true about many Biblical books), and the book’s contents make it difficult to determine when it was written. The first 6 chapters recount events that occurred long before Ezra’s time. The last four chapters (7-10) are all events that occurred in Ezra’s lifetime, but some if it is written in first person (7:27-9:15) and some of it is written in third person (7:1-26 and 10:1-44). It is possible Ezra may have combined the other materials with his autobiographical writings to form the book. Or, a contemporary or later person may have collected all the portions to describe Israelite history in this time. Many scholars believe that the same author wrote Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1–2 Chronicles. In fact, in ancient times, Ezra and Nehemiah were counted as one book.

So, that’s a little historical background on Ezra. So now, let’s read Ezra chapter 1. **(Scripture Passage Here, followed by sermon title slide)**

So, at this point they are under Persian control, as Persia conquered Babylon. And Cyrus, the King of Persia, in his first year after conquering Babylon and thus inheriting the Israelite exiles, declares that they may return home. This is a fulfillment of what Jeremiah prophesied earlier: that the exile would end after 70 years. We see that prophecy in Jeremiah 25 and again in chapter 29. So that comes to fruition.

We’re told in verse 1 that the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus. To be clear, Cyrus was not Jewish. The sovereignty of God, however, is on display in this. And we see that even people who are not in relationship with God can be influenced by God. And that is exactly what happens here. As one commentator puts it, “God governs the world by his influence on the spirits of [people], and, whatever good is done at any time, it is God that stirs up the spirit to do it, puts thoughts into the mind, gives to the understanding to form a right judgment, and directs the will which way he pleases.” So, Cyrus is moved by God to let the Israelites return to their homeland.

He makes it official with a proclamation, and even gives credit to the Lord for his success, and says that the Lord has appointed him to build a temple for the Lord in Jerusalem. He goes on to say that anyone in the region of Babylon that was just conquered, who is an Israelite, may now return to their homeland to help rebuild. This is almost unheard of. But in mythical literature, Cyrus is portrayed as “fatherly”, having a “kindly character”, and being a just, wise, and amiable ruler. While those descriptions are not about the historical figure seen here in this passage, there’s good reason to believe that they have a grain of truth in what he was actually like. In fact, there is a small clay cylinder (**Picture**) that now resides in the British Museum in London, that records the history of Persia conquering Babylon. And on it Cyrus is represented as saying, “I assembled all those nations and I caused them to go back to their countries.” And certainly, this proclamation in these verses in Ezra fits that statement.



Regardless, one thing we see here is that: **God can move in the hearts of people who haven’t acknowledge him as Lord, and even work through them.** If we don’t believe that, then we’ve got a pretty small view of God. God moves in mysterious ways, and this is one example of how God does that – even working through someone who is far from him to be an instrument of grace.

Maybe God is working in some unexpected way in your life. Perhaps there’s an unexpected measure of grace. Or maybe it’s a time of refining and pruning that God is initiating. God had earlier allowed Assyria and then Babylon to conquer the nation of Israel because of Israel’s unfaithfulness to the Lord. It was his way of disciplining them. Assyria conquered the northern ten tribes, and later Babylon the southern two as well as the Assyrian-conquered northern tribes. But because God is gracious, he eventually works through Cyrus to return them home. God can work in similar ways in our lives and in

our world through people who are far from God. Our job is simply to be open to God's leading and God's movement. So, the thing to take away from this, ultimately, is that God initiates the rebuilding process.

The second thing we see here is the importance and centrality of worship for God's people. The job they set out to do is to restore the Temple; to rebuild it. While our sanctuary and church building is certainly revered as the central place we gather to worship God, we probably are a little more open-minded about the necessity of worshipping here. Jesus certainly de-emphasizes the importance of worshipping God in any certain place, including the Temple. (John 4, for example). Worshipping God, we would say, is not really about a building. But for them, the Temple really was *the* place to worship God.

So, to go and “build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem” as verse 5 tells us they prepared to do, is to be putting worship of God first. After all those years of not having their central place of worship, they still have passion to worship God. There's some re-learning to do; there's some re-building of their spiritual lives and their worshipping life together. But their desire to rebuild shows their heart for worship. Any other rebuilding that they do from that point forward – the wall around Jerusalem, the roads, the buildings, the rebuilding of relationships and community and their identity as a nation – all of that rebuilding is centered on their life together as a worshipping community.

The third and final thing to take away from this is hinted at in this passage but then we get more of it in chapter two. **This final point is how they all came together to rebuild the Temple, and gave what they could to make it happen.** Have any of you seen the movie “High School Musical”? If you have seen it (or the sequels) then you have daughters in your house or granddaughters in your family. Am I right?

And if we were to summarize this third point – even the whole of Ezra (and Nehemiah) – in a song, the theme song (?) for that movie, “We're all in this together...” would do it well. It's a pretty catchy song and a pretty

entertaining dance routine to go with it. Rebuilding happens when each person realizes, “We’re all in this together.”

In fact, when you read verses 5 and 6 we see that some people were moved by God to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple, but others did not. Those people who did not go back to Jerusalem, the “neighbors” of those who did go as the passage puts it, gave freely of their gold, silver, livestock and more, to support the efforts. In one way or another, everyone gave to the rebuilding effort. They really are “all in this together.”

And in chapter 2 we get to see who the people are who returned to help rebuild the Temple in some capacity. It’s a laundry list of family names (read some of the list) but it’s the descendants of these people, with the exact number listed with each family name. All told, about 50,000 people head to Jerusalem. Some would be hands-on doing the labor of building the Temple, while others are doing other things that would be needed for all of them to live there – like ranching and farming, and so forth. But all of it was geared toward the rebuilding. That was their goal and their aim.

So, you put all of this together and we see that any rebuilding effort in our lives – our church, our families, or anywhere else – first needs to be prompted by God. God initiates, and we respond. God opens our eyes to see and puts it in our hearts to sense that something is broken, something isn’t right, isn’t the way it was or could be. And then God will open a door for the rebuilding to happen. Cyrus was the door that opened for them. It was unexpected to them, but through him God initiates this rebuilding process. So, God has to be at the heart of any rebuilding efforts; it has to be prompted by Him, evident that He’s initiating this.

Second: Any rebuilding effort has to be grounded in worship; it has to flow out of our ongoing relationship with God. Worship in the New Testament in particular (actually, OT as well), isn’t just about gathering together one day a week at a certain location. It’s whole lives lived dedicated to God. Jesus affirms the Old Testament teaching that we are to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. That’s not just an hour or so on Sundays. That kind of worship, that’s born out of a deep, all-encompassing

love of God: that is where rebuilding is born. They could have started by rebuilding the wall, or the roads or something else. But Worship, their relationship with God, is where they started, and it's what carried them through their rebuilding efforts.

Third: If there's going to be a successful rebuilding, it really takes everyone who's on the team contributing as they are able. If one person thinks there are problems in the relationship and some rebuilding is needed, but the other doesn't think so or doesn't want to rebuild, it's going to be tough to rebuild. If a church envisions a new future and believes God is even putting this in their hearts but the people aren't on board with their time and their talents and their treasure, then the rebuilding is going to be tough. It takes everyone covenanting with God and with each other, doing what they can, giving as they can, to successfully engage in this kind of rebuilding effort.

So whatever rebuilding efforts you have in your life, remember these three things. **It starts with God, it stays focused on God through worship, and it takes everyone on the team contributing as they are able.** I pray we experience that kind of rebuilding here at Rose Hill; we have in many ways, but there's a sense that there's further still to go. I believe God has prompted this. That was the belief of the church 10 years ago, before I was called as pastor, and it's the belief we've continued to live into – that God was prompting this and leading us by His Spirit to do some “rebuilding.” So, we've lived into that and have made good progress the last several years. Hopefully, as we've done that, we've stayed focused on God and kept our hearts pure and our relationship with God first as we've worshipped him only. We want to make worship of God a priority – not just on Sundays but as a whole-life experience for each of us, and keep in that place of worship going forward. And as God continues to lead us, let's recognize that we are all in this together. We've covenanted with God and with each other (it's in our denominational name, even!) to be this faith community, where we're seeking to make Rose Hill a generationally-balanced church where people of all nations are shaped as disciples of Jesus Christ. May it always be so, to the glory of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Let's pray...Amen.