



Ezra 7:1-10
Ezra: Rebuilding
“The Grand Return”

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Today we continue on our journey through the book of Ezra, as we look at the people of Israel rebuilding the temple and rebuilding their life together as the people of God. They’ve been in exile for several decades, pulled out of their home cities, as they’ve been conquered by Babylon, and then Babylon was conquered by Persia. So, they’re part of the Persian kingdom at this point, though they have been allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple.

And so far, as you may have noticed if you’ve been with us the three previous weeks, we have not yet encountered a person named Ezra, who is the namesake of this book. And we’re roughly half way through it. But today, that changes, and we get to meet Ezra. So, let’s turn to Ezra 7:1, where we will read the first 10 verses. This is God’s Word to you and me today.... (**Ezra 7:1-10**). Pray.

So, first, we’re told that what we are going to be reading here is during the reign of king Artaxerxes, and then part way through we’re told more specifically that these verses record events that took place in the 7th year of Artaxerxes. We know from other historical documents that the events we’re reading of here occurred in the year 458 B.C. This also means that there is a 50-year gap between the events of chapter 6 and here in chapter 7. So, when chapter 7 starts with “After these things...” it’s referring to things in chapter 6 that were several decades earlier.

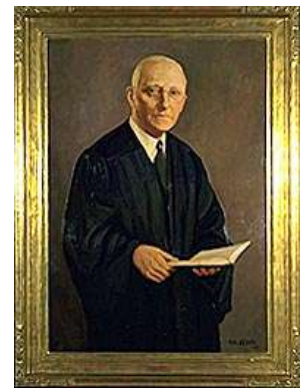
Then we get introduced to Ezra. Finally! And there are three things we learn about him that make him qualified to help with their rebuilding process. **First, he had the right lineage.** The introduction of Ezra starts off with a genealogical record of Ezra. We might at first think this is here just to clarify which Ezra is being described. And the text indicates that when it says in verse 6, “...*this* Ezra came up from Babylon.” Just in case there’s any confusion about which Ezra it is, this family history makes it clear, since it goes back more generations than I can count. Seems kind of overkill, doesn’t it?

But this introduction does something else: It tells us that Ezra is a direct descendent of Aaron, who was the first high priest in the Jewish faith.

Ezra has priestly lineage. It's in his family. In fact, the text tells us that his father was Seraiah, who was the high priest at the time of the Temple's destruction, and who went back in the earlier wave of people with Zerubbabel (chapter 2). Maybe he was even one of those people who was disappointed in the foundation of the new temple that we read about a couple weeks ago? But all of these guys listed here had been priests or even high priests throughout Jewish history. It was the family ministry, going all the way back to Aaron.

Now, this mattered for them. In fact, it was God's directive that the Levite tribe, out of the 12 tribes of Israel, would be the priestly tribe. This was their responsibility. **But lineage isn't everything, right?** It doesn't have to determine who you are and what you do. (Depending on your family history, some of you might want to give a hearty "Amen" to that!)

For instance, in my family, we have people who have been in the field of law. I say "in the field of law" because if I tell you I have lawyers in my family, you might start to get a little skeptical of me. I don't know my family all that far back. Nothing like we get on Ezra, that's for sure. But my great-grandfather (**Picture**) on my dad's side was a judge for 52 years, including 25 as Justice on the Supreme Court of the State of Michigan, and he served four one-year stints as the Chief Justice for that court. That's Walter H. North.



That painting of him that is hanging up in the Michigan State Supreme Court building. You can tell where I get my good looks from! 😊 Of course, you can also tell where I get my hairline from. His son, my grandfather (Walter P. North), was also in law. He was the chief counsel (lawyer) for the Securities and Exchange Commission. He tried several cases at the U.S. Supreme Court, and according to relatives who know more than I do, was undefeated in like 10 or 12 cases there.

But the thing is, is that my dad (Walter B. North) did *not* go into law, which means there was no pressure on me to continue. Had my dad done that, there's a good chance I wouldn't be in front of you – unless I'd become a judge and you were in my court. Though, John Calvin was a lawyer before he turned to theology, so you never know. But: Lineage does not have to determine who you are. I'll also add that my dad also broke a tradition of at least three generations of naming their sons “Walter.” I've never thought of my dad as a rebel until writing this sermon – he didn't follow his grandfather and dad into law, or name me Walter!

So, the point is, that lineage is great (or at least it can be – there can be a family history we'd just as soon forget or not be associated with), and Ezra has great lineage; but: **Lineage doesn't automatically make you who you are or what you will become.** Just because your family has a history of being a certain way, or doing a certain thing – again, for better or for worse – that doesn't mean that's what you'll do, or how you'll be. It isn't enough on its own. We can't move forward if we're only relying on the past, including our family history. So, Ezra needs more than a great family history...more than a great lineage, in order to rebuild, and so do we.

Ezra shows us what else is needed and it is training; it is studying. He invested in himself. Verse 6 tells us that “He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses.” This “Law of Moses” is synonymous with the “Mosaic Covenant” or just “The Covenant.” It's the Covenant God made through Moses with the Israelites at Mt. Sinai. It could also refer to the first five books of the Bible – of which the centerpiece is God's Covenant with Israel.

And then later in verse 10 it reiterates that he had devoted himself to the study of the law and to teaching it as well. He's like an athlete or a musician who has a lot of natural talent – there's a lineage that's been inherited by a lot people who have athletic or musical ability, but they still put in lots of time studying their craft, practicing it, working very hard at it, because an inheritance of opportunity, or talent, or ability isn't enough.

When it comes to faith: **We need our own time of study as well, and like Ezra it's not just for our own edification. It's to pass along the faith.** You

could pass along the faith to anyone of any age or relationship, but I will suggest that especially if you are a parent with kids still in the home you have an extra measure of responsibility to be familiar with Scripture so you can pass along the faith to your kids. How can you teach them what you don't know, or what you aren't readily familiar with? So, you really ought to not only be in worship every Sunday – or at least watching online – but also engaged in some additional kind of Bible Study. Ideally, with a group of people to keep you accountable to actually doing the study, and people who will encourage you, pray for you, give you opportunities to serve and pray for them, and help you grow in faith. I'm part of a men's Bible study that meets at 5:45 on Friday mornings, but it blesses and encourages me, and strengthens me in my faith, as it does for the others.

So, Ezra became a teacher who was well-versed in this covenant. He studied it for himself and for others. He wanted to be close to God and he wanted others to walk closely with God. This is important for the rest of the book of Ezra, as we'll see as we go along.

So, he has good blood lines, but that's not enough to lead the rebuild. He studies and shares that knowledge with others, but that's not enough either. That brings us to the third and final thing we learn about him here as we see in verse 10: **That Ezra observed the Law.** He observed it in the sense that he put it into practice – like drivers who observe the rules of the road. We put into practice the rules for driving a car properly and safely. Much the same, Ezra practiced what he taught. He lived it out.

If we say or teach one thing, but live another, then we reveal our own lack of conviction in what we're teaching. And for sure, no one is perfect in living out faith. And the good news is that God's grace and forgiveness are bigger than our faith. Salvation through faith in Jesus isn't dependent on the size of our faith – even faith the size of a mustard seed gets the job done. And disobedient living doesn't invalidate the truth of who God is, or the truth of his grace and mercy; we can't invalidate the cross of Christ or the empty tomb. So that's good news. But God invites us not only to know Him, his Son Jesus, and the Holy Spirit...and to know Scripture...**He also invites us to live it out as we follow Jesus.** That is always Jesus' invitation: follow me.

There's action involved. Ezra shows us that here. He was obedient to what he studied and learned and taught. It wasn't just head-knowledge.

All of this together made him qualified for the job of rebuilding Israel. And by the way, the lineage thing was important for them because the Levite tribe were the priestly tribe for Israel, but as a general rule for us that piece isn't really a factor for serving in ministry roles. If it was, I wouldn't have become a pastor. As far as I know, I'm the first in my family – certainly the first in at least four generations on either side of the family. And this is not true just for becoming a pastor, but for serving and leading in any facet of ministry – whether paid or volunteer. Or even following Jesus: Some of you are the first in your family to ever follow Jesus. So for us, lineage isn't as important.

So: **Ezra is qualified for this role of leading the rebuilding.** And he comes up from Babylon to Jerusalem, completing the journey in just over four months. From the way it's told – that God's gracious hand was upon him – it sounds like that was a little bit expedient, that it might normally take longer. Now, after the passage we read, we get a letter from Artaxerxes commending Ezra and the people he takes with him to return to Jerusalem, and he promises various supplies and financial support for them. And then after that letter, at the end of chapter 7, and into chapter 8, the events recorded change to 1st person: from Ezra's perspective. And one thing he notes part way through chapter 8 is that indeed, God's hand of grace was upon them and protected them on the journey from enemies and bandits.

Chapter 8 also gives us a long list of people who returned with Ezra, just as we had earlier in chapter 2 of those who returned with Zerubbabel and others who led the first wave of people to return 70 years earlier or so. In chapter 2 we got a total number of people who returned – about 50,000 – while this time we don't. So, we don't know how many came back. But it was a grand return, which is what I've titled today's message.

And it wasn't a grand return because of the number of people. Maybe it was more, maybe it was less than the first wave of folks. That's irrelevant. It was grand because with Ezra came a new phase in the rebuilding. You know, you may wonder through the first 6 chapters of a 13 chapter book why this is

named after Ezra. I mean, we don't even see his name through approximately...the first 46.15% of the book. 😊 Why is it named after him? Why isn't it named Zerubbabel? Heck, you could make a case for it being named after one of the Persian kings – especially Cyrus, who God worked through to begin this whole rebuilding process. Or maybe it should be named more like the book of Exodus – like Exodus, part 2, even. But no: It's named after Ezra.

Why is this book named after Ezra? Because the rebuilding that Ezra led was the work that mattered most. The faith of the people – individually and collectively – seeking to love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength...seeking to “walk humbly with their God”...seeking to walk along the path that God and his word illuminates...seeking to keep their part of the covenant that God made with them...all of that is what really matters.

So, the “Grand Return” really is a “Grand Return” to God. It's a “Grand Return” to Scripture. It's a “Grand Return” to their spiritual roots. It's a “Grand Return” to repentance. It's a “Grand Return” to obedience to God. It's a “Grand Return” to God's grace. It's a “Grand Return” to their faith.

This is not to say that rebuilding the Temple wasn't important. This is not to say that church buildings aren't important. We've had people working on our restroom remodel throughout Covid and just a couple weeks ago several of them spent several straight days working to get them all finished up. And the restrooms look fantastic. Such an improvement over what they looked like before. They look so good I might take a nap in the men's room after church today.

So, buildings are important. **But the name of the book – Ezra – tells us that the rebuilding he did was the most important part.** Our walk with God, lived out in our everyday life...lived with obedience is what matters. And because 480 years later Jesus fulfilled our side of the Old Covenant with his death on the cross, and backed up his claims through his resurrection...and so we live in the New Covenant that he establishes...because of that work he has done on our behalf, our obedience is simply our response to God's grace and goodness in our lives. “Obedience” in some ways almost isn't the right

word this side of the cross, because it lacks gratitude: A person can be obedient and grumpy at the same time. We live for Jesus because we are grateful for what he's done, for his grace, his love, his mercy that give us new and abundant life. We're obedient, but it's driven by gratitude, not obligation. Jesus has finished the work, he's upheld our end of the bargain for us, and we say "Yes" to him, follow him, and live out our faith in order to draw others into a covenant relationship with Jesus. And so, any rebuilding in our lives starts there.

Maybe that walk with Jesus needs some rebuilding in your life? Perhaps you've been focused on rebuilding other facets in your life without rebuilding your walk with the Lord. Perhaps there's been too much Zerubbabel, and not enough Ezra. Or perhaps you've been rebuilding on a shoddy foundation like career, money, or something else. So, maybe Jesus has been set aside or minimized. I invite you to consider rebuilding on the solid rock, the word of God made flesh, Jesus the Messiah.

Any rebuilding effort we take on *needs* this grand return as well. This is the heart of the matter. Jesus is the centerpiece of our faith. We may have a great lineage – which we do here at our church by the way; we may have great study and teaching and understanding of Scripture that we utilize to teach others and pass on the faith; and we may have great obedience rooted in thankfulness for God's grace and mercy shown to us in Jesus. All of that together can equip us for rebuilding our lives, our families, our church, and more. Let's just make sure we're rebuilding what's most important, and that is our walk with God...Our journey with Jesus. This is true individually, in our families, and in our church family. It's about glorifying God on our journey together as God's people, joyfully living out our faith and shining the light of Christ so that God's kingdom would come and his will would be done, on earth as it is in heaven. May it be so here at Rose Hill Church, and in each of our lives. Let's pray...Amen.