



Ezra 9:1-15
 Ezra: Rebuilding
 “Setting the Spiritual Foundation”

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Today we draw to a close our series in Ezra. Next week we’ll begin a new series, staying in the Old Testament, and staying right in the same time period as Ezra...and staying with another book that is a two-syllable word that begins with E: Esther. (**Esther Sermon Graphic Here**). Esther is a fascinating section of Scripture from which we can learn a lot about God, how he operates, and what it means to be in relationship with God. I hope you will join us each Sunday in this series, and invite someone along!

But today we wrap up Ezra. (**Sermon title graphic for today.**) As I’ve said before, and you may already be aware, Ezra and Nehemiah go together very closely, and for many centuries were seen as one unit. So, I’ve been spending some time in Nehemiah the last few weeks as well. And in going back and forth between the two, I mixed up how many chapters are in each book. I told you last week that Ezra has 13. But that’s wrong. Nehemiah has 13. Ezra only has 10. But, that actually strengthens the point I made that we might wonder why the book is named after Ezra since he doesn’t appear until chapter 7: Because instead of making an appearance about 45% of the way through the book, he doesn’t appear until 60% of the way in! So, it’s an even greater percentage of the book that doesn’t have him than I told you last week, which only reinforces the importance of the rebuilding that he led.

With that confession of the mix-up, let’s dive in. (**Scripture Passage, Ezra 9:1-15.**) A pastor was at church when she received a phone call that her daughter was very sick with a fever. She left church and stopped by the pharmacy to get some medication. She got back to her car and found that she had locked her keys in the car. She didn't know what to do, so she called home and told the baby sitter what had happened. The baby sitter told her that the fever was getting worse. She said, “You might find a coat hanger and use that to open the door.”

She looked around and found an old rusty coat hanger that had been left on the ground. She didn’t know what to do with it, so, she bowed her head and asked God to send her help. Within five minutes a beat-up old motorcycle

pulled up, ridden by a dirty, greasy, bearded man who was wearing an old biker skull rag on his head.

The gal thought, “Dear Lord: This is what you sent to help me?” But, she was desperate, so she was also very thankful. The man got off of his motorcycle and asked if he could help. She said, “Well, yes, my daughter is very sick. I stopped to get her some medication and I locked my keys in my car. I must get home to her. Please, can you use this hanger to unlock my car?” He said, “Sure.” He walked over to the car, and in less than a minute the car was open. She hugged the man and through her tears she said, “Thank you so much! You are a very nice man.”

The man replied, “Lady, I am not a nice man. I just got out of prison today. I was in prison for car theft and have only been out for about an hour.” The pastor hugged the man again and with sobbing tears cried out loud, “Oh, thank you God! You even sent me a professional!”

Sometimes God answers prayers in ways we don’t expect – and in ways that exceed our expectations. I don’t know if the people in Jerusalem who had returned from exile in the first wave of returnees, or their now grown kids or even grandkids because it’s been 80 years since the first wave of returnees came...**I don’t know if they were praying for someone like Ezra to come along, but if they were, they sure got a professional. God answered their prayers, and then some.**

As we saw last week, Ezra returned from the city of Babylon to Jerusalem, with a second wave of returnees. The first group, 80 years earlier, were the “early adopters”. They’re the ones who got smart phones and electric vehicles soon after they were first released. Now comes another wave of people with Ezra who are anything but early adopters. A lot of rebuilding has already happened in Jerusalem and perhaps in other communities as well.

But with Ezra comes a whole other facet of rebuilding, and as we talked about last week, it’s the part that really matters. One commentator says that this 9th chapter of Ezra is really central to the whole book. That’s how

important Ezra is, and especially this chapter. And what Ezra helped them rebuild was their covenant relationship with God.

Now, if you've ever done any kind of home remodel or renovation, you know that before you can build the new stuff, which is the fun part, you have to do some demo work first. You've got to get rid of the stuff that isn't good any more, and get down to material you can use, or build onto. For instance, sometimes someone goes to replace a roof that's failing, and as they start taking off the old roof, they find out it's been leaking longer than they realized, and they have to replace the plywood under the roofing material, or maybe even replace the trusses that support the roof, or they discover that water has even gotten into the walls and they have to replace some of the studs in the wall because they're rotting out.

That kind of work is messy and not always a lot of fun, especially if you have to rip out a lot more than you were anticipating. **That's pretty similar to what happens once Ezra comes to Jerusalem – there's some "demo work" that needs to happen.** Ezra comes into town and at the end of chapter 8 we see that he brings all the items to the Temple that he brought from Babylon – worship items that had been a part of the original temple, got hauled to Babylon and stored away, and now brought back to their rightful place in the new Temple. So, when 9 begins with, "After these things had been done," that's probably what's being referred to.

Then some leaders come to Ezra to tell of some concerns about how the people are living. In fact, verse 2 makes it clear that even some of the leaders and officials are engaging in practices that go against their covenant with God. They need to do some tearing down before they can rebuild. Then the rest of the passage is essentially Ezra's prayer, and this is where the deconstruction begins.

Now, the marriage rules sound antiquated to our ears. Particularly in other facets of society outside the church – Hollywood, our schools, government, and more – the idea of having restrictions about who you can marry seems rather antiquated. But we have to look at why this rule was given. And it was

given for reasons of relationship with God. In other words, the restrictions were given for spiritual and religious reasons.

For instance, in Deuteronomy 7, as the Israelites are preparing to move into the land that God has promised to them, they are very specifically told not to intermarry with the people of that land, or make a treaty with them. They are told not to give their daughters to these people in marriage, or to take the foreign daughters in marriage to their sons. And then: **In verse 4 we're given the reason why: "...for they will turn your children away from following me to serve other gods..." (Deuteronomy 7:4).** In today's passage, it speaks of their "detestable practices." Right there is the reason why this restriction on marriage is given: It will lead to a compromise in their walk with God. Their future relationship with God is at stake; not just on an individual level, but on a national one even. The people themselves aren't the problem, it's their beliefs.

That spiritual element and impact of marriage is almost always under-valued and even overlooked. And not just in the overt ways like in today's passage. I mean, when you realize what's at the heart of this prohibition, it's understandable. I know I want *my* kids to marry people who are believers in Jesus just as they are – for the sake of their own faith, their kids' faith and the generations to follow. Probably you'd like that for your kids and grandkids...and if you're single hopefully you want that for yourself.

But even apart from that overt spiritual impact, there's the basic foundation of marriage as something that is given to us by God. Marriage is spiritual from the beginning. We see in Genesis 2 that marriage was given by God as a joining together of one male and one female, and the very fact that it has been instituted by God makes it a spiritual relationship automatically. It's a reflection of the intimacy in the Godhead and in our own relationship with God. Now, a lot of people overlook that, and for a lot of people marriage has lost this spiritual component. I think this is a huge reason why marriage today, much like in Ezra's time, has become compromised. We've lost the sanctity of marriage and its intention of a male-female unity. So, the state of marriage today largely misses the spiritual foundations of marriage: That it is

a gift given by God for a man and a woman to be joined together to bring glory to God.

Here in this passage, they made compromises and lost sight of the spiritual implications of marriage and the generational impact of marrying someone who has a completely different set of beliefs. But this is exactly how sin creeps into our lives on an individual level, let alone at a national level or church-wide level. We start making small concessions and give in a little on certain convictions so that they aren't really convictions any more. And then slowly those become wholesale compromises that pull us completely away from God's will. This is why it's so hard for us to set our own standards and maintain them. It's too easy to adjust our standards to someone else's ideas.

But when God sets the standard, it doesn't change. We may not meet it perfectly, we may not always like the standard...but the standard doesn't become compromised. God continues to uphold his standards and we are called to live up to them. When we don't, it's called "sin". There's plenty of that going on in our lives and in our world, and we don't need to intentionally set aside God's standards and therefore increase the amount of sin in our lives or in our world. There's enough unintentional sin on its own.

So, Ezra hears this, and he's completely distraught because they're completely ignoring God's standard. And it's not a case of ignorance. These people who come to him knew what the standard was, and the people who were engaging in these marriages that compromised their covenant with God knew it too. Ezra reacts in some physical ways that are expressions of grief and anger and frustration, he sits in stunned silence for the better part of a day, and then in the evening turns to God in a prayer of confession.

There are three things to note about this prayer, and this is where the real deconstructing work begins. **First, Ezra uses "we" language rather than "they" language.** For instance, in verse 7 he says, "our guilt has been great...our sins" have led to their captivity – which unites them with their ancestors; he's including himself with those who lived 150 years or so earlier who disobeyed God which led to the Babylonian exile. And then he identifies

with those presently living against God’s word when he says in verse 10, “we have forsaken the commands you gave...” Verse 13, he speaks of “our evil deeds” and “our great guilt.” So, even though the sin he’s confessing isn’t really his own, he recognizes that he’s in this with them. It’s a show of solidarity with the people, rather than judgment. I think this is where we Christians get this wrong more than any other point. **We tend to use “us” and “them” language and it’s very divisive.** If our own sin is part of what put Jesus up on the cross as Scripture tells us, then we are a part of the sins of this world – whether we’ve explicitly committed a particular sin or not. This is a “we” thing much more than an “us and them” thing, and having the humility to approach divisive things in our world in this way would make them less divisive.

Second, he acknowledges the sin rather than glossing over it. So often we don’t really want to acknowledge sin in our lives, and just move on to the solutions. We confess (maybe), but it’s kind of bland and generic; maybe our heart really isn’t even in the confession – like we don’t believe our own prayer, or we don’t really hate the sin. We don’t want to tear away the bad material in our lives, so that the good material would have something solid to join onto. We don’t deconstruct things before we begin the construction. But Ezra doesn’t do that. He readily acknowledges the sin and what it is in this prayer.

Third, he continually acknowledges God’s grace that has gotten them safely to where they are – in spite of their sin – and trusts that God will continue to be merciful and gracious. God has not punished them even as much as they deserved, and Ezra pleads with God to continue to be gracious toward them. We need to be reminded of God’s grace even in the face of our failures to live up to God’s calling – whether that’s our own failures or those we are associated with in our families, our churches, our cities and our nation. So those are three things we learn from his prayer of confession. It’s where the demo work begins.

Then, in chapter 10, the people respond to this, and assemble around him, acknowledge their sin, and agree to rectify the situation by separating from their spouses of other people groups and religions. And the book ends with a

list of all the people who had married foreign people. And that's how it ends: with a list of people. It's really all rather anti-climactic. In fact, it's almost kind of a downer.

So, in the final analysis, what is the point of the book of Ezra? It starts on such a high note with refugees returning to their homeland, on a mission to rebuild the temple and re-engage as a community...but by the time you get to the end some 80 years later, they're right back into falling away from the Lord's ways and confessing their sin. **Here's what we learn in Ezra, however: Real rebuilding in our lives is not about the things we see; Real rebuilding begins with setting a spiritual foundation by getting right with God, and that is a matter of the heart.** Rebuilding the temple wasn't *wrong*, but it wasn't the main point. The point is for them to walk humbly with their God, to bow to him and say "yes" to Him and his plans for us, even when it's challenging. We need a new heart for God, a new heart for his standards, and a new heart for people. Ezekiel 36 and Jeremiah 31 get after this message well when they speak of God giving us a new heart. Not a heart of stone, but a heart of flesh...in other words, a heart that is soft toward God and his ways, rather than going our own ways.

In Matthew 15:8, Jesus quotes Isaiah 29:13, which also puts it well, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." That was the problem in Ezra's day, it was the problem in Jesus' day, and I bet, if we're honest with ourselves, we'll realize it's the problem in our day – both collectively as a nation, state, city, neighborhood and even as a church, and individually as well. Our hearts are not soft toward God.

So, don't rebuild on anything but the good news of Jesus. That's the foundation. Have a soft heart toward him. Maybe it takes some demo work to get down to our soft hearts: confessing our pride, greed, lust, or whatever it may be that's making our hearts hard toward God. **When we are broken by our sin, the hard exterior falls away, softening us toward Jesus so he can come in and give us a rock-solid foundation.** Building onto anything else is going to come up short, and leave us a little empty feeling, just as the book of Ezra leaves us a little empty. But because of that, Ezra shows us our great need for the love, grace, and forgiveness of God. And fortunately, God gives

us that love, grace, and forgiveness, and it comes to us through a true professional, who never got out of prison because he never went to prison but he did come out of the tomb. He's the one who is the author and perfecter and foundation of our faith, and his name is Jesus. And he invites you to have a soft heart toward him, and rebuild your life with Him as your foundation. Let's pray...Amen.