



**GULF SHORES
CHURCH OF CHRIST
Gulf Shores, AL**

Sunday Morning Bible Study Series

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Ezra: Introduction

Author:

Unknown. It is traditionally associated with Ezra.

Date:

It is believed that Ezra was written after 440 BC and Nehemiah was written around 430 BC.

Division of the Books:

It is interesting to note that some of the early church fathers thought of Ezra and Nehemiah as I and II Ezra. Josephus and the Jewish Talmud refer to the book of Ezra but do not reference the book of Nehemiah independently. The oldest manuscripts of the Septuagint (pre-Christian Greek translation of the Old Testament) also treat Ezra and Nehemiah as one book. Therefore, in the English translations by Wycliffe (1382) and Coverdale (1535) these books were called “I Esdras” (Ezra) and “II Esdras” (Nehemiah). It is virtually impossible to rightly divide the content of one of these books without the other. Likewise, one should study the book of Esther to get a greater appreciation for the historical significance of the return to Jerusalem.

According to the traditional view, Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in the seventh year (458 BC; Ezra 7:8) of Artaxerxes I. He was soon followed by Nehemiah, who arrived in the king’s 20th year (444 BC; Nehemiah 2:1,11). Some have proposed a reverse order in which Nehemiah arrived in 444 BC, while Ezra arrived in the seventh year of Artaxerxes II in 398 BC. By amending “seventh” (Ezr 7:8) to either “27th” or “37th,” others place Ezra’s arrival after Nehemiah’s but still maintain they were contemporaries of each other. These alternative views, however, present more problems than the traditional position, in my opinion. As the text stands, Ezra arrived before Nehemiah. In fact, they are found together in Nehemiah 8:9 (at the reading of the Law) and in Nehemiah 12:26-36 (at the dedication of the wall).

Languages:

Ezra and Nehemiah were written in a form of late Hebrew. However, there is an exception in Ezra 4:8-6:18 and Ezra 7:12–26, where portions were written in Aramaic. This was the language of international diplomacy during the Persian period. Of these 67 Aramaic verses, 52 are in records or letters. It is believed that Ezra found these documents in Aramaic and copied them, inserting connecting verses in Aramaic.

Audience:

The intended audience is the people of Judah returning from the Babylonian exile.

Theme:

A remnant of the Israelites, who had been exiled, returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. God chose the time for this revival. The people needed complete restoration in a timely fashion. The Lord used world powers to judge His people, but now they could return to their homeland. The people were to await the “new covenant” (Joel, Ezekiel, Jeremiah). This will be discussed at a future time.

Literary Notes:

It is a historical book, much like I & II Chronicles, with stories and lists. In fact, many scholars assume that the writer of I & II Chronicles also wrote Ezra and Nehemiah. The lists include: (1) the temple articles (Ezra 1:9–11), (2) the returned exiles (Ezra 2, virtually the same as Nehemiah 7:6–73), (3) the genealogy of Ezra (Ezra 7:1–5), (4) the heads of the clans (Ezra 8:1–14), and (5) those involved in mixed marriages (Ezra 10:18–43). Similarly, Nehemiah includes the following lists: (1) those who helped rebuild the wall (Nehemiah 3), (2) those who sealed the covenant (Nehemiah 10:1–27), (3) residents of Jerusalem and other towns (Nehemiah 11:3–36) and (4) priests and Levites (Nehemiah 12:1–26).

Political Significance:

Ezra was a scribe. Therefore, he has included seven official documents in this book. It should be noted that all of these documents are written in Aramaic, except the first, which is in Hebrew. These documents include: (1) the decree of Cyrus (1:2–4), (2) the accusation of Rehum and others against the Jews (4:11–16), (3) the reply of Artaxerxes I (4:17–22), (4) the report from Tattenai (5:7–17), (5) the memorandum of Cyrus's decree (6:2b–5), (6) Darius's reply to Tattenai (6:6–12) and (7) the authorization given by Artaxerxes I to Ezra (7:12–26).

Contemporaries of Ezra & Nehemiah:

Prophets - Haggai and Zechariah prophesied during this time period.
Kings - Cyrus, Darius "The Great," Xerxes (Ahasuerus), and Artaxerxes

Outline of Ezra:

I. Restoration of the Temple (1-6) & Return under Zerubbabel (538-515 BC)

- A. The decree of Cyrus (1)
- B. The census of the people (2)
- C. The revival of temple worship (3)
- D. The opposition to the project (4)
- E. The construction begins (5:1-6:12)
- F. The construction completed (6:13-22)

II. Reformation of the People (7-10) & Return under Ezra (457 BC)

- A. The leadership of the reformation (7)
- B. The second census of the people (8)
- C. The marital issues of the people (9)
- D. The response of the people (10)

Outline of Nehemiah:

I. Nehemiah's Service to the King (1)

II. Rebuilding the Walls of Jerusalem (2-6)

- A. Organizing the work (2-3)
- B. Opposition to the work (4-6)

III. Reviving the People of God (7-12)

- A. The census of the people (7)
- B. The reading and reforming of the people (8-12)

IV. Reforming the Work of the Lord (13)

Study Outline For This Series

The Renewed Hope of God's People (Ezra 1:1-11)

- I. The Edict of Cyrus (1:1-6)*
 - The decree given by Cyrus (vs.1-4)
 - The response of the people (vs.5-6)
- II. The Response of the People (1:5-6)*
 - The response of the people of God (v.5)
 - The response of the community (v.6)
- III. The Return to Jerusalem (1:7-11)*
 - Description and numbering (vs.9-10)
 - Transportation of the articles (v. 11)

The Return of the Exiles (Ezra 2:1-70)

- I. The Census of the People (1-63)*
 - The men of Israel (2:1-35)
 - The men of the priesthood (2:36-39)
 - The Levites, singers, and others (2:40-58)
- II. The Unconfirmed Exiles (2:59-63)*
 - Purification and confirmation needed (v.59-62)
 - Priests consult Urim and Thurim (vs.63)
- III. Reality of the Return (2:64-70)*
 - Summary of the exiles (vs.64-67)
 - Contributing to the work (vs.68-70)

The Restoration of the Temple (Ezra 3:1-13)

- I. Rebuilding of the Altar (3:1-2)*
 - Built after Law of Moses (vs.1-2)
 - Purpose was to offer burnt offerings (v.2)
- II. Reinstating of Temple Worship (3:3-6)*
- III. Rebuilding of the Temple Complex (3:7-13)*

The Rivals of the Restoration (Ezra 4:1-24)

- I. Rivals Under Cyrus (4:1-5)*
- II. Rivals Under Xerxes(4:6-16)*
- III, Rivals Under Artaxerxes I (4:17-22)*
- IV. Rivals Under Darius (4:23-24)*

The Renewed Efforts for Restoration (Ezra 5:1-17)

- I. The Leadership of the Prophets (5:1-5)*
 - The word of God came to the people (vs.1-2)
 - The questions of the critics (v.3)
 - The challenges of the work (vs.4-5)
- II. The Correspondence with King Darius (5:6-17)*

The Resolution of Political Problems (Ezra 6:1-22)

- I. The Political Dilemmas are Resolved (vs.1-12)*
 - The discovery of King Cyrus' decree (vs.1-5)
 - The decree of King Darius (vs.6-12)
- II. The Completion of Temple (6:13-15)*
- III. The Dedication of the Temple (6:16-18)*
- IV. The Observance of the Feasts (6:19-22)*

The Resolve of Ezra (Ezra 7:1-28)

- I. The Heritage of Ezra (7:1-6)*
- II. The Travels of Ezra (7:7-10)*
- III. The Appointment of Ezra (7:11-26)*
- IV. The Exaltation of God by Ezra (7:27-28)*

The Reliability of Ezra (Ezra 8:1-36)

- I. Ezra Returns With More Exiles (8:1-14)*
- II. Ezra is Disappointed With the Priests (8:15-20)*
- III. Ezra Proclaims A Fast (8:21-23)*
- IV. Ezra Assigns Work to the Priests (8:29-30)*
- V. Ezra Leads the Journey to Jerusalem (8:31-36)*

The Reflection of Ezra (Ezra 9:1-15)

- I. Ezra Recognizes Israel's Sin (9:1-4)*
- II. Ezra Confesses & Prays to God (9:5-15)*
 - He confesses Israel's sins (vs.5-7)
 - He acknowledges God's love (vs.8-9)
 - He identifies the broken commandments (vs.10-12)
 - He refuses to ignore Israel's guilt (9:13-15)
- III. Ezra Recognizes the God's Providence (9:15)*

The Remnant of Israel (Ezra 10:1-44)

- I. The People Assemble (10:1-4)*
 - The people consider their sins (v.1)
 - The leaders reflect on broken commands (vs.1-2)
 - Shecaniah suggests a bold plan of action (vs.2-4)
- II. The People Consider Action (10:5-11)*
 - Ezra offers a proclamation & warning (vs.5-8)
 - The men gather to consider the proposal (vs.9-11)
- III. The People Respond to Ezra (10:12-24)*
 - The assembly agrees to repent of their (vs.12-15)
 - The people planned to offer sacrifices (vs.16-17)
- IV. The Long List of Offenders (10:18-44)*
 - The priests were guilty (vs.18-22)
 - The Levites were guilty (v.23)
 - The singers and gatekeepers were guilty (v.24)
 - The other Israelites were guilty (vs.25-43)
 - Each of these had pagan wives and children (v.44)

Lesson 1: The Renewed Hope of God's People

Ezra 1:1-11

Introductory Thoughts

Why were the people so desperate for spiritual renewal?

Why did God chose to chasten His people with wicked people?

Ezra 1:1-3, II Chronicles 36:22-23, Jeremiah 29:10-14 are repetitive. Why?

How many years had they spent in captivity?

I. The Edict of Cyrus (vs.1-4)

What do we know about Cyrus?

What can we learn from this edict?

Who predicted this event 150 years before? Why does that matter?

What are the similarities between this story and the exodus?

How can we learn from world leaders? Are they all evil?

II. The Response of the People (vs.5-6)

How did hope and prayer help make this promise a reality?

What will be some of the keys to their spiritual renewal?

How can we see God's divine purpose and plan through the captivity?

III. The Return to Jerusalem (vs.7-11)

What points could be gleaned from the plunder of the Assyrians and the Babylonians?

What was the will of God throughout this whole process? Why does that matter?

Concluding Thoughts

How can we become a renewed, holy, worshipful, and evangelistic people?

How can take our eyes of our individual problems and onto God's greater purposes?

Lesson 2: The Return of the Exiles

Ezra 2:1-70

Introductory Thoughts

Why do you think Ezra gave this list to the readers?

What would have been the minds of the people on their return?

How do you think they felt about their covenant with God?

I. The Census of the People (1-63)

What can we learn from the men of Israel?

Why were the men of the priesthood important for this return?

When you see the Levites and the singers what can you assume is coming next?

II. The Unconfirmed Exiles (2:59-63)

Why did some need purification and confirmation?

Why did the priests consult Urim and Thummim? How did it work?

What can we learn about such practices by these leaders?

III. Reality of the Return (2:64-70)

Why do you think Ezra offered a summary of the exiles?

What can be said of the faithfulness of these followers of God?

What can be said of the faithfulness of God?

Who chooses to contribute to the work? Why is that important?

Concluding Thoughts

When we compare this story to Nehemiah, what can we see on the horizon?

We see their commitment to worship, service, giving, and personal growth. What can we learn?

How can God use tragedy, loss, grief, and pain to discipline us?

How can that discipline make us stronger? Establish our faith deeper? Encourage us?

Lesson 3: The Restoration of the Temple

Ezra 3:1-13

Introductory Thoughts

What are the positive benefits of starting over?

What would be some of the obstacles of starting over?

Why do you think they sought to repair the temple so quickly?

I. Rebuilding of the Altar (3:1-2)

How did they build the altar? Why did they use the Law of Moses as a guide?

What was the purpose of offering burnt offerings?

Did the repairs compare to the glory of Solomon's temple? Why does that matter?

II. Reinstating of Temple Worship (3:3-6)

How was the Word of God helpful in this effort?

Why didn't they assume God had "softened" up?

What is the temple called? Why does that matter?

Who was supposed to lead this part of the restoration?

III. Rebuilding of the Temple Complex (3:7-13)

Where did they get the resources for this work?

How did their emotional state motivate them in this work?

What could the older members teach the younger ones during this process?

What could the younger members teach the older ones during this process?

Concluding Thoughts

How does worship affect your daily living?

What value would it have for you to work on the church building?

Lesson 4: The Rivals of the Restoration

Ezra 4:1-24

Introductory Thoughts

Why does it seem that obstacles surround us when we are doing the work of the Lord?

What does this tell us about Satan and his influence in the world?

I. Rivals Under Cyrus (4:1-5)

Why is there value in cooperation with unsaved, unreligious people?

How can those compromises cause difficulty?

II. Rivals Under Xerxes (4:6-16)

Who is Xerxes? Where do we find more of his story?

Where were the royal archives kept? Why?

III. Rivals Under Artaxerxes I (4:17-22)

Why did Xerxes and Artaxerxes become sympathetic to this cause?

Why did the king instruct these things to be kept secret?

IV. Rivals Under Darius (4:23-24)

How did they respond when they saw a copy of the letter? Why?

Why did this bother the scribes and the leaders?

Why didn't they keep moving forward with the work?

Concluding Thoughts

Why is it important to know the enemy?

What can we do to resist the enemy?

Is there value in fear? How can submitting to God quiet our fears?

What can we do to persevere in the face of opposition?

Lesson 5: The Renewed Efforts for Restoration

Ezra 5:1-17

Introductory Thoughts

Why had they stopped the work?

Who told them it was time to stop the work?

I. The Leadership of the Prophets (5:1-5)

What happened when the word of God came to the people?

How did the presence of the prophets help the work?

What do we know about Haggai's prophetic work?

What do we know about Zechariah's prophetic work?

What is the significance of the questioning of the critics?

What were the challenges of the work? Why?

II. The Correspondence with King Darius (5:6-17)

What would have happened if the Jews would have waited until the appeal was processed?

Why did the exile happen? Who was truly to blame? Babylon or the Jews?

Who is credited in laying the foundation of the temple?

What can we learn from the patience of the Jews?

Concluding Thoughts

How does Satan find ways to break up the work of the Lord?

What can we do to avoid falling into his traps?

What can we do to trust in God in the midst of the storm?

In what ways can we see the providence of God throughout this whole process?

Who deserves the credit for this restoration?

Lesson 6: The Resolution of Political Problems

Ezra 6:1-22

Introductory Thoughts

Why are people consumed by politics?

How does politics hinder the work of the Lord's kingdom?

I. The Political Dilemmas are Resolved (vs.1-12)

What happened when they discovered King Cyrus' decree?

What did the decree of King Darius say?

Did the people forget this public proclamation or was it hidden, ignored, or abolished?

How does this new decree circumvent the rivals of the work?

II. The Completion of Temple (6:13-15)

Why was it so important to finish the temple?

How did they receive the funds to finish this work? Who gave the money? Why?

III. The Dedication of the Temple (6:16-18)

How long had they waited for this celebration?

What did they do during this celebration?

IV. The Observance of the Feasts (6:19-22)

Why is there a clear distinction between the clean and unclean things in this text?

What feast did they observe? Why did the leaders make this choice?

Concluding Thoughts

How do personality differences challenge us in the work of the church?

What can we learn from the feasts of the Old Testament and New Testament?

What can we learn about the passion of the people in this text?

Lesson 7: The Resolve of Ezra

Ezra 7:1-28

Introductory Thoughts

Why is it important to have strong resolve in a leader?

What other characteristics do we hope to see in a leader?

I. The Heritage of Ezra (7:1-6)

Why is the genealogy of Ezra listed here? What can we learn from it?

What does it mean to be a "skilled" scribe?

II. The Travels of Ezra (7:7-10)

What delayed the travel? How long was the delay?

How long did the journey take? Who receives the credit for the safe trip?

Why does the tenth verse of this chapter offer great insight into Ezra's life?

III. The Appointment of Ezra (7:11-26)

How did the appointment of Ezra change the work?

Why was tax exemption such a valuable tool for the work?

Why were the instructions of the king made repeatedly clear concerning the use of the money?

IV. The Exaltation of God by Ezra (7:27-28)

What is said about the efforts of the work in Jerusalem?

What can we learn about Ezra's personal feeling concerning this work?

How can surrounding ourselves with other good leaders help everyone involved?

Concluding Thoughts

Ezra prays a beautiful prayer of thanksgiving. How can that help us in our work?

The work was not complete and they had not changed their lives. How could this help them?

Lesson 8: The Reliability of Ezra

Ezra 8:1-36

Introductory Thoughts

Why is it important to have reliability in our leaders?

How can we learn this characteristic from our God?

I. Ezra Returns With More Exiles (8:1-14)

Why did Ezra bring more people back with him?

Why are they all listed by name? Why does that matter?

II. Ezra is Disappointed With the Priests (8:15-20)

Why were the Levites reluctant to return to Jerusalem?

Who were the "men of understanding" and what is their importance?

III. Ezra Proclaims A Fast (8:21-23)

What was the purpose of this fast?

What did they do during this fast? Why?

IV. Ezra Assigns Work to the Priests (8:29-30)

How did this change their perspective? What benefits was there to this action?

Where were they to put these items? Why?

V. Ezra Leads the Journey to Jerusalem (8:31-36)

How did the people view God throughout this journey?

Who contributed financially to this work? Why is that important?

Concluding Thoughts

How long had Ezra been gone from Jerusalem?

What do you think he will do as soon as he gets home?

Lesson 9: The Reflection of Ezra

Ezra 9:1-15

Introductory Thoughts

How is prayer such a powerful tool in the arsenal of a believer?

Why is prayer good for the individual? For the congregation?

I. Ezra Recognizes Israel's Sin (9:1-4)

Why did he offer this intercessory prayer?

Why didn't he just address his own sins?

What can we learn from Ezra's posture, attitude, and choice of words?

II. Ezra Confesses & Prays to God (9:5-15)

Why did he confess Israel's sins? What were their sins?

Why does he acknowledge God's love and mercy?

Why does he identify the broken commandments?

Do you think revival would have happened if they had refused to ignore their sins?

Did they feel guilty? What does the Bible say about their reaction?

III. Ezra Recognizes the God's Providence (9:15)

Could this be seen as a prayer? Sermon? Both? Explain.

Ezra used confession, fasting, and prayer to help himself and others. What can we learn?

Who did he blame for the hardships they faced as a nation? Why?

Concluding Thoughts

How does prayer change things?

How can we survive the wrath of God?

What happens when we reflect on God's mercy, love, and faithfulness?

Lesson 10: The Remnant of Israel

Ezra 10:1-44

Introductory Thoughts

Why is it important to revive ourselves before we revive the work?

I. The People Assemble (10:1-4)

What do we know about the people and their concern for their sins?

Why did the leaders reflect on broken commands?

What can we learn about Shecaniah and his suggestion for such a bold plan of action?

II. The People Consider Action (10:5-11)

What was Ezra's proclamation and warning?

How long did the men gather to consider the proposal? Why?

III. The People Respond to Ezra (10:12-24)

What was the decision of the assembly? What did they do?

How will offering sacrifices help?

What would be the end result of this process?

How long would it take? What would be the implications?

IV. The Long List of Offenders (10:18-44)

Were the priests and Levites guilty? What can we learn?

Were the singers and gatekeepers guilty? What can we learn?

Why were they hesitant to let go of their pagan wives and children?

Concluding Thoughts

Sometimes following God is very difficult. Why do His commands seem so hard to follow?

Every moral reform finds some opposition. Does that mean it is not worth it? Explain.

How can marriage outside of the will of God be difficult for couples, children, and the church?

Ezra: Conclusion

Recommendations for further study:

I strongly urge you to study Nehemiah and Esther. We have already studied them as a congregation in recent years, but it would serve you well to consider them for personal study. Nehemiah gives more details to the story and Esther gives us the historical significance of these events. Esther also show the influence of an Agagite (Haman).

Recommended commentaries for further study:

Leslie C. Allen and Timothy S. Laniak
Matthew Henry Commentary
Keil and Delitzsch Commentary

World Biblical Commentary
J. G. McConville Commentary
Pulpit Commentary

Supplemental material from the New International Version:

<http://biblica.com/niv/study-bible/ezra/>

Works and outlines by Chuck Monan:

<http://www.pvcc.org/Table/Ezra-Nehemiah-13-Weeks/>

Works and outlines by David E. Pratte:

<http://www.religionofjesuschrist.com/commentary/history/ezra.pdf>

Bible study series by Steven J. Cole:

http://www.fcfonline.org/search_methods.asp?search=1&search_method=advanced&sermon_book=Ezra

Bible study series by Ray Reynolds:

I conducted a series of lessons on Esther with the aid of resources from Leslie C. Allen, Timothy Laniak, David Malick, Chuck Swindoll, Wade Webster, and Ron Williams. That study outline is also available at our church website.

<http://www.gulfshoreschurchofchrist.org/dnn/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=Bdavvcg-Du4%3d&tabid=162&mid=675>