

Ezra

Tuesday Bible Class

October 13, 2009

Intro: Perhaps some of you are wondering why I chose the books of Ezra and Nehemiah to teach at our Tuesday Bible class. Well, I began to think about this last June when these two books were the OT reading in our Daily Bible Reading Calendar. They were an encouragement to me at that time, and it seemed to me that it would be an encouragement to all of us, living in the times that we live. I guess you could say that about any part of the Bible, but it was a special blessing to me in those days. It has to do with the return of Israel from captivity where the people had been living under the judgment of God. Like the other books of the Bible, it tells us much about God, which is always an encouragement to us. Years before the events of the book of Ezra, the prophet Isaiah had been led to write those two wonderful verses in Isaiah 26, verses 3 and 4:

3 Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee.

4 Trust ye in the Lord for ever: for in the Lord JEHOVAH is everlasting strength:

Those verses are good counsel for any time in history. In fact, if the people of Israel had remembered and been obedient to those verses, they never would have gone into exile. But they set their minds on other things, and consequently turned away from the living God. All kinds of sin resulted, and the judgment of God fell upon them.

Now along with thinking about their relationship with God, the book of Ezra, along with the book of Nehemiah, give us plenty of evidence of the providence of God. If you look at the first verse of Ezra, you have an illustration of what Solomon had written in his book of Proverbs. And here I am thinking about Proverbs 21:1 where we read, "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will." That goes for all kings, all Presidents, all dictators. If the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, then surely everyone else in government is "in the hand of the Lord." This does not mean that the Lord is responsible for their sins, their mistakes, or any other wrongdoing on their part, but it does mean that the Lord never has, and never will, take His hands off of the affairs of the nations of the earth. Kings and dictators, and even presidents, think they are in control, but nothing could be farther from the truth.

Now, having said that, we are reminded by the books of Ezra and Nehemiah that the Lord's work has enemies. And sometimes, God permits them to hinder, and even to stop, the work of the Lord. Chapter 3 in Genesis tells us that there is a Devil, and that he is always seeking to disrupt the work of God and the will of God, and we see his opposition in Ezra and Nehemiah although he works behind the scenes. The Jews main enemies were not "flesh and blood," that is, enemies that they could see, but as Paul wrote later, they were evil principalities and powers, rulers of the darkness of this world, spiritual wickedness in high places. And yet God is greater than all of the forces of evil in the world.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah teach us the importance of prayer. It was at the throne of grace that Ezra and Nehemiah got their guidance, got their strength and courage to persevere in the work that God had called them to do. It is interesting that Ezra does not actually appear in this book which carries his name until chapter 7. The first six chapters are written in the third person, that is, by someone who was not directly involved like Ezra was from chapter 7 on to the end of the book. But from chapter 7 through the end of the book, the writer was personally involved. So we see the pronoun "I" appearing frequently. Ezra is the writer of the book, but he probably got the material in the first six chapters from various records which he compiled to fill in the details of what took place before he got to Jerusalem. Ezra was not the main builder of the temple; the builder was Zerubbabel. Ezra was a priest, and a teacher of the Law of God. Ezra has been referred to as a reformer and/or a consolidator of the revival that had taken place in the hearts of the people of God.

This was "a day of small things" when we compare what was going on in Israel in these days with the numbers who came out of Egypt. When the Lord delivered the children of Israel from Egypt, you will remember that the

population then numbered over 600,000 men. Adding women and children it has been estimated that could have been a total of from 1,500,000 to 2,000,000 people altogether. The number of Jew who returned under Zerubbabel was 42,360, plus 7,337 servants (Ezra 2:64, 65). But, as the saying goes, “little is much when God is in it.” And a little is better than nothing. Obviously God was at work on behalf of His people.

But there is another point that needs to be made about the book of Ezra. You will notice that the names of two OT prophets is found in the earlier chapters of the book. They are Haggai and Zechariah. See Ezra 5:1 and 6:14. And then in Ezra 7:11 we are given a description of who Ezra was. He was “the priest” and “the scribe, the scribe of the words of the commandments of the Lord, and of His statutes to Israel.” So his ministry was primarily a ministry of the Word of God, as much of it as they had in those days. But then we see in the verse before, Ezra 7:10, that Ezra was a very godly man. He “prepared his heart to do three things:

- 1) “to seek the law of the Lord,
- 2) “and to do it,
- 3) “and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.”

It is very obvious that Ezra’s mission in coming to Israel after the Temple was built, was to teach the Word of God to the people. It is very likely that most of the people had very little knowledge of the truth. The Temple without the Word of God was not enough to maintain fellowship with God. They needed to know what the Lord wanted them to do it, and then to do it. Perhaps an illustration of the importance of the Word of God can be seen in the lives of people who think that attending church on Sunday morning is sufficient for a life of fellowship with the Lord, while they give no attention to the Bible the other days of the week. Ezra came to Jerusalem as a Bible teacher. The temple was a very vital part of their fellowship with the Lord, but it was not everything! It needed to be preceded and followed by daily obedience to the Word of God.

So a vital part of the spiritual restoration of the Temple had to do with the ministry of the two writing prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, and when the Temple was finished, Ezra came to add to the ministry of the prophets. No words of mine can possibly state the importance of the Word of God if there is to be true fellowship with the Lord.

Now while I am on this subject, let me ask a question. Why do you think that the Lord God gave Cyrus a charge to build Him a house in Jerusalem? Would it not have been more reasonable to build the city walls first so that the Temple would have been protected from its enemies? Why was the charge to Cyrus from God made to build the Temple first?

Let me point out another interesting point. This has to do with the building of the original Tabernacle as the children of Israel made their way through the desert toward the Promised Land. Please turn to Exodus 25. Reading from verse 1, this is what the Lord told Moses. (Read the first 22 verses commenting on the sanctuary, its purpose, following by the instructions as to how the ark of the covenant should be built, what should be put in it, and what the Lord’s relationship to Moses would be at the ark of the covenant.)

So we have the same situation years later when the Temple was to be rebuilt.

The point which was being emphasized both in the Tabernacle, and here in the book of Ezra with the Temple, was that there was to be nothing that was more important than the presence of the Lord with His people. If the Lord were not in the Tabernacle, it became just a tent. And the same was true of the original Temple, as it was with the Temple in Ezra’s day. *God wanted to be with His people, and that was to take precedence over everything else!*

Basically what is the most important need in your life and my life today? Is it how often we go to church? That is important, but there is something else that is more important. Is it how many times I read my Bible

from Genesis to Revelation? No. That is important, but not what is most important. Is it how many I speak to about Christ and salvation? Again, that is very important, but it is not #1. Is it how many sermons I preach, or how many classes I teach, or even how many books I write? It seems today like everyone is writing books. Many of them are very helpful. But neither does writing books have the greatest priority. *As a Christian, a child of God, my greatest priority is to live in fellowship with the Lord.* That is what gives meaning to going to church, to reading the Bible, to witnessing to others, and, if the Lord so leads, to writing books that will be a blessing to the people of God. And yet there are professing Christians who do all of those things, but who are not paying attention to their fellowship with God. I hope I am not one of them, and I hope that you are not one of them either.

The church at Corinth had a lot of problems when Paul wrote his first epistle to them. But do you remember what he said to them in verse 9 of 1 Corinthians 1? He said, "God is faithful by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ." God called us into fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ; believers did not request it. The Israelites did not ask God for a Tabernacle; it was God's idea, not theirs. And in the same way we learn from the beginning of the book of Ezra, not that the people were asking for a Temple, but that God moved upon Cyrus' heart to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem so that He would have a place to meet with them. The idea was God's. It was not Cyrus' idea, not did the plan come from the Jews. God and the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit saved us because they want to be with us, or have us to be with them. The Lord Jesus gave expression to this in His last extended time with His disciples before His death. You will remember, I am sure, those wonderful words in John 14:2 and 3 where we read that He said to them:

2b I go to prepare a place for you.

3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.

I am sure that none of us can possibly understand how much the Lord desires our fellowship. If we do, it will give new meaning to our Bible reading and a new tone to our praying.

But where is the temple of God today? Is it the building where Trinity Bible Church meets? No. Is there any church building that can rightfully be called the Temple of God? None on the face of the earth. Will there be a temple of God today? Yes, there is. And the Apostle Paul told the Corinthians where it is. Again, referring to Paul's letters to the church at Corinth, you will find these words in 1 Corinthians 6:

16 Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?

17 If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are (1 Cor. 3:16-17).

Notice as the temple of God they were holy, and so are we!

And then in 2 Corinthians the Apostle Paul got into this glorious theme again. And this is what he had to say to those believers in that day, and which applies to us also. Listen to these words in 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1:

14 Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?

15 And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel?

16 And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

17 Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you,

18 And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.

7:1 Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

In OT times God sought to dwell with His people. Since Christ came, and died for our sins, after which He

rose again from the dead, now He lives in us, making us the temple of God.

Both of these passages which speak of believers today as being the temple of God, emphasize the fact that knowing this truth, and living in the light of this truth, produces holiness of character and holy living.

So this subject as presented to us in the book of Ezra, has a tremendous message for us where the temple of God is not a building as it was as it was rebuilt in his day, but we are the temple of God today, you and I as blood-bought children of God, are God's dwelling place on earth. You can see how life-transforming this will be for us to realize who we are in our relationship with all three Members of the Godhead.

So in the Tabernacle, the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies was built first, and when the Temple and the city were rebuilt in Ezra and Nehemiah's day, the Temple came first. The Jews were safer with the Temple without the City than they ever could have been in the City without the Temple. It was the Temple that made the City, the city of God, not the people. But when the people lived in sin, and turned away from the Lord, He withdrew His presence and His blessing, and the Temple became just another building.

The prophet Habakkuk gave expression to the truth that we are considering in the book of Ezra when he denounced idolatry and then glorified the Lord with these words found in Habakkuk 2:19-20:

19 Woe unto him that saith to the wood, Awake; to the dumb stone, Arise, it shall teach! Behold, it is laid over with gold and silver, and there is no breath at all in the midst of it.

20 But the Lord is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him.

Let us think of dates for a moment. I like to think of some of the leading Bible characters of the OT in round numbers:

- 1) Abraham, 2000 B.C.
- 2) Moses, 1500 B.C.
- 3) David, 1000 B.C.
- 4) Isaiah, 700 B.C.
- 5) Ezra, 500 B.C.

More specifically 538 B.C. is the date usually given to Cyrus' edict to release the Jews to return to their own land. The fall of Jerusalem was in 586 B.C.

The outline of the book of Ezra:

- I. The rebuilding of the Temple (Ezra 1-6).
 - A. The return of the exiles (Ezra 1, 2).
 - B. The work begun (Ezra 3).
 - C. The work opposed and stopped (Ezra 4).
 - D. The work resumed and completed (Ezra 5-6).
- II. The ministry of Ezra (Ezra 7-10).
 - A. The move of Ezra from Babylon to Jerusalem (Ezra 7-8).
 - B. The Jews' abominable sin – mixed marriages (Ezra 9-10).

As a guide to our study from Derek Kidner about Ezra and Nehemiah: "Quite clearly these two books are more than a bare chronicle. Here are events to learn from, not only to learn about" (*Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 19). And we need to be reminded also of 2 Timothy 3:16-17 which applies to the OT as well as to the NT.

THE EXPOSITION

10/19/09

The first chapter of Ezra has to do with the return of the Jews from exile. The date is 538 B.C. The fall of Jerusalem was in 586 B. C. In chapter 1 we have the amazing decree issued on behalf of the children of Israel who were carried away captive in 586 but were at this time under Medo-Persian rule. Chapter 1 has to be one of the most amazing chapters in all of the Bible when we consider who issued the proclamation for the Jews to be returned to their land. Read chapter 1.

1:1 If we need any proof of the sovereignty of God over the nations of the earth, we certainly have it here. By the sudden way Ezra recorded this for us, it appears that it must have been completely unexpected by the Jewish exiles, but a reading of the book of Isaiah shows that it had been in the purpose of God for approximately 200 years before. And since we know that God's plans and purposes go back before the foundation of the world, we should not be surprised that Isaiah wrote about Cyrus, even calling him by name before he was born. Please turn with me to Isaiah 44:28 and 45:1-4. (Read.)

Notice that this was also in fulfillment of what the Lord had spoken through Jeremiah. The reference is to Jer. 25:12-13. Turn with me to that passage and follow as I read verses 8 through 14.

We can be sure that the Jews chafed under their Babylonian captivity just like their fathers had chafed under their Egyptian bondage. See Exodus 2:23-25. In Moses' day it must have looked even more hopeless because Moses, you will remember had killed an Egyptian who was abusing an Israelite, and so Moses had to flee from Egypt, and he had gone down into Midian where he lived for forty years. We have no record here that the Jews were praying for deliverance. The action was initiated by God Himself who dealt directly with the great King Darius. While the dates that are used, are debatable, yet when the Lord stirred the heart of Cyrus, the Jews had not yet been in captivity a full seventy years. So we need to recognize the mercy of God in this situation just like the Lord Jesus promised that God would shorten the days of the Great Tribulation "for the elect's sake" (Matt. 24:22).

Here in Ezra 1:1 God did a work in the heart of Cyrus which no power on earth could possibly have forced him to do, and yet he issued the proclamation with the speed and detail as though it had been all his idea!

Cyrus' proclamation is given to us in verses 2 through 4.

1:2 There are two specific truths that Cyrus acknowledged in this verse. First, he gave "the Lord God of heaven the glory for the position he held as the greatest monarch of that particular time. Just how extensive his knowledge of the Lord God was, we cannot say. But the first of his two statements in this verse certainly shows some special knowledge of God. Cf. Isa. 45:3-4. Perhaps this knowledge was given to him at that time. That much seems clear.

Now I feel sure that Darius had no idea of the special place that the temple had in the lives of the people of Israel. The temple was the place where God dwelt with His people. We saw last week that even in the building of the Tabernacle in the OT, it was the Holy of holies that the Lord spoke about first to Moses. Originally the Tabernacle, and later, in Solomon's day, both were constructed with the clear purpose of making a place for God to dwell among His people. And the message is that fellowship with the Lord is the basic need of all of us who are His people.