

Ezra 1:5-11 - Jeffrey Smith

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Date: 12 August 2018

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[0:00] We welcome you to the media ministry of Bethel Community Church, knowing Jesus, making Jesus known. If you have your Bibles or your phone and you want to turn to Ezra, we're still in chapter 1.

We just started this study last week. Dave did a great job of kind of kicking us off, giving us an introduction and some background. And so we'll do a little bit more of that this morning, and we'll jump into verses 5 through the end of the chapter in 1, which is 11.

You know, it's often said that history repeats itself, right? History repeats itself. And I wish I would have really kind of grasped that when I was in school, because I didn't really appreciate the subject of history, right?

At the time, it kind of felt like just a boring thing. You know, we're taking a lot of notes, reading books. Like, what is this even, how does this relate to me today? But then when you start to think about the value of that statement, history repeating itself, that means that whether it was distant history or recent history, if it was something good, you can kind of look at that and look at what happened and look at, you know, the situation around that, and you try to repeat that.

Or if it was bad, you try to avoid that, whether it's something personally or maybe something kind of on a macro level. You know, when you kind of look at maybe society today, you can say, hey, this reminds me of this period, and in that situation, it ended up this way.

[1:39] And so you can kind of be maybe a little bit more prepared for that. There's another famous quote that says, those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

So this morning, we're going to look at our passage in Ezra, and I want to make two comparisons. Two comparisons.

The first is, I want to make an interesting comparison to a parallel passage in Exodus. And the second is, I want to look at how this passage in Ezra relates to our own lives.

Okay? And so, I want to start by saying a couple things. One is, I was really excited to go through this passage. One is, and you don't have to admit this with me, but I knew very little about Ezra. I don't even know if I could really even have told you where it was in the Bible before. I knew very little about Ezra, much less did I know much about how it fit into the history of the Jewish timeline.

[2:48] And so, and also, I didn't even know really much of its association with Nehemiah, which is sad to say because Nehemiah is one of my favorite stories. He's the, you know, the person of Nehemiah is someone that I've always respected, his leadership, his initiation.

And so, that was one reason why this passage was so intriguing to me. The second was, I've always admired teachers and preachers that could take a passage and quickly and naturally say, hey, this reminds me of another passage in the Bible.

And suddenly, when you can kind of draw those parallels, you're studying history, you can start to say, hey, you know, by drawing some of these comparisons, this gives us some additional insight into what may have been happening here in this passage in Ezra.

And so, that's not something I'm good at. But maybe it's because I just don't study enough. Maybe I have a bad memory. It's the things that I've studied in the past I can't remember to draw from as far as a memory bank.

But I have been reading recently this story of the Jews leaving Egypt in Exodus. So, it's fresh in my mind. I had a little help from the commentaries as well.

[4:09] But I think you're going to see pretty clearly this strong correlation between, we'll call it Exodus 2, where the Jews are leaving

Babylon here in Ezra, compared to Exodus 1, where the Jews are leaving Egypt.

Same group of people, both leaving kind of a captive state. And there's just a lot of similarities there. So, we're going to look at four similarities. There's a bunch of them, but we're going to look at four of them.

And the interesting thing is, each one of these four can be related to our own lives as well. So, if you have your Bibles, let's look at Ezra chapter 1, starting in verse 5.

It says, It says, Cyrus, the king, also brought out the vessels of the house of the Lord that Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem and placed in the house of his gods.

Cyrus, king of Persia, brought these out in the charge of Mithradath, the treasurer, who counted them out to Sheshbazar, the prince of Judah.

[5:40] And this was the number of them. 30 basins of gold, 1,000 basins of silver, 29 censers, which a censer is a knife, which is kind of an interesting thing.

A little knife collection was thrown in there. 30 bowls of gold, 410 bowls of silver, and 1,000 other vessels. All the vessels of gold and of silver were 5,400.

All these did Sheshbazar bring up when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem. Let's open our prayer. Heavenly Father, we just appreciate this passage this morning, Lord, and I just pray that your word goes forward.

I pray that it's clear and it's something that we can walk away with today relating to our own lives. Lord, we thank you for this example, and we thank you for just your word here.

In your son's name, amen. So before we begin, let's kind of start, as I often like to do, with a little bit of the context, the big picture view.

[6:49] For me, sometimes I get caught up in the passage, and you're like, what's happening here? Give me some idea of kind of the bigger picture.

And so Dave, again, did a great job of this last week, but again, if you have a bad memory like mine, it's always helpful to get a simple reminder.

So let me start by saying this. The book of Ezra, if someone said, summarize the book of Ezra in like one or two sentences, I would say something like, the book of Ezra is largely about how a group of Israelite exiles go from Babylonia or Babylon back to their homeland, specifically Jerusalem, for the purpose of rebuilding the temple.

So if you had to summarize it, the Jews in Babylon going back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, the exodus, leaving Babylon, going back home.

And what I'd like to do in just a minute is give you some understanding as to why are these Jews exiles to begin with, and why are they having to rebuild the temple? What happened to it?

Obviously, it's in need of repair. We'll get into that here in a second. Dave mentioned last week also the close tie between the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

[8:06] Is anyone with me in the understanding or in the feeling of, hey, Nehemiah is pretty familiar, Ezra not so much? Anyone else? Okay, I see a couple heads nodding. So if you're thinking, hey, Ezra is about the rebuilding in Jerusalem.

I thought Nehemiah was about the rebuilding. What's happening here? The explanation is this. You are right to question it. Ezra came first.

Ezra is about the rebuilding of the altar and then the temple, and then Nehemiah comes right after Ezra. Like, literally, if you look at a timeline, it's right after it. And then Nehemiah comes to build the wall around Jerusalem.

So for a brief kind of history lesson here, the Jews ended up in Babylon. And if you're looking at your Bible, Ezra, after Ezra is Nehemiah.

Before Ezra is 2 Chronicles. So if you looked at the last chapter of 2 Chronicles, you get an idea of why the Jews are in Babylon. As they were so good at doing, the kings of Israel and Judah did evil in the sight of the Lord.

[9:20] Right? And they were conquered by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. And it wasn't... I haven't done a ton of study on this. Sometimes it feels like, you know, the conquering is done.

Everything is taken. It's kind of one clean and cut move. In this case, it wasn't as much. Nebuchadnezzar came and slowly started conquering that area.

And in about three ways was bringing exiles from Judah, from Jerusalem, from Israel to Babylon. Babylon. Four of the most well-known captives or exiles. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. So if you're thinking timeline here, this is when Daniel and that crew are brought to Babylon.

And that is obviously when kind of that story with Nebuchadnezzar begins. This is all around 600 BC, if you're trying to kind of put this on the timeline.

[10:21] So that's why they're in Babylon. And then it talks about how King Nebuchadnezzar took vessels out of the temple in Jerusalem and brought them back to Babylon.

So that kind of explains why King Cyrus is giving them back in this passage. It also says in verse 19 that there's an account where it describes how God's temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by fire and the walls were broken down.

A lot of information there. Does that make sense as far as where we are there? So the Jews are in captivity in Babylon.

King Cyrus has made this unprecedented decree that they can now go back to rebuild the temple, which was destroyed by fire some 70 or so, 80, 100 years before.

So here's where history starts to repeat itself in a slightly different way. But it does start to kind of generally repeat itself. Many of us are familiar with the story of the Israelites in Egypt, right?

[11:34] So you have Jacob and he's got all these sons and the sons didn't like Joseph and they sell Joseph away. And Joseph gains a high position in Egypt. The famine comes.

All of Joseph's family come to Egypt. They go to live there. They become prosperous. They live in Egypt for, say, 430 years, I think it is.

The Egyptians start to recognize that, hey, these people are getting pretty numerous, pretty powerful, and they start to oppress them as nations often do, right?

The ruling nation wants to maintain that power and control, and so they start to oppress and enslave the lower nation that was the Israelites then.

And like I said, that was the normal situation. When one nation would take over another nation, what would they do? They would plunder everything that they wanted to keep. They would take captives.

[12:32] They would destroy everything else. That was kind of the normal protocol for one nation taking over another. You saw oppression, enslaving, killing, stealing, all of this, the destruction of cities, the destruction of anything that they didn't want to keep themselves.

So can you imagine the shock of being an Israelite in Babylon? They were there for roughly 70 years.

And suddenly the king says, you can go. Like, it's just, it's unfathomable.

It was hard for me to kind of think of an example of something like that today. I mean, the closest thing I could think of, this is a terrible example, is if I gave my kids a ton of chores, and just as they were getting started, I said, hey, no more.

You can go play Legos downstairs and go build that Lego. I mean, they would be ecstatic. It was just so out of the norm for King Cyrus to suddenly give this decree that you can go home.

[13:42] King Cyrus was the king of Persia. Persia had taken over Babylon and King Nebuchadnezzar. It was normal for a king to take over and rule his people and continue to enslave them for his benefit, right?

You continue to build things for me and do things for me. By just saying, you can go, it's just shocking. It wasn't the 400 years that the Israelites had spent in Egypt, but still 70 years is a long time, and I'm sure it felt good knowing that they were going home.

So, what would God teach us from this passage? And how can we apply it to our own lives? This morning, I want to give you four instances of how God can teach us something from this second exodus here in Ezra and how it relates to the first exodus out of Egypt and what it means for us.

So, the first thing I just want to simply say is, in this passage, we clearly see that God is the primary mover. He's the primary mover.

Working in the hearts of King Cyrus, working in the hearts of the leaders of the Jews. When it uses the term, if you look at it in 5, it says, God had stirred up, everyone whose spirit God had stirred up. [15:15] In verse 1 of Ezra, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus. So, you're starting to see this direct intervention from the Lord where he is stirring up the hearts of people.

The word stirred means to rouse oneself, awaken, incite. It's used over 80 times in the Old Testament. And you see something similar in the story of Moses and Pharaoh, right?

It's not the word stirred, but what word is used? Hardened. It says the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart. You know, Moses brought 10 plagues.

And after each plague, Pharaoh's like, okay, okay, okay. But then he hardened his heart again, right? And so, there was this obvious, in both stories, example of God being the primary mover. I will make one point here. This is an interesting one. It would be worth looking into. But I don't want to reconcile the difference between the divine sovereignty of God and him being able to do whatever he wants with man's free will, right?

[16:34] Because there is kind of an interesting dynamic there. The good thing is, in both of these stories, the impact, the stirring, the hardening that the Lord had on these people was compelling enough to where they cooperated.

So, that's an interesting point there. And so, when you think about how does this apply to us, right? You see God stirring the heart of Cyrus.

You see God stirring the heart of some Jewish leaders. You see God hardening Pharaoh's heart. And when you kind of take a step back and you're saying God is the primary mover here, to me, the encouragement is this.

Because sometimes when you think about maybe your own heart, maybe the heart of someone else, and you're praying for that person. And, you know, maybe it's a situation where they're a believer and they're not walking with the Lord.

Or maybe they're not a believer and you're just like, that person is so far away from, you know, just from an acknowledgement of God being who he is.

[17:35] It's comforting to know that the Lord is still in the business of moving and of shaping hearts. And he can have a direct impact on someone. You hear stories all the time of people that are so far against the Lord and so far in disbelief of the Lord.

And the Lord changes that person. And reconciles that person. And restores that person. And it's an encouraging thing. Sometimes we think of God kind of sitting on the throne in the distance. And, you know, he doesn't meddle with us common folks here. But that's not the case. He loves his children and desires a close relationship with us.

And he does all of this for one big purpose. Which I'll mention at the last point. There's one big purpose that he does all of this, this direct work within.

The second point is, the second point of comparison in these two stories in Ezra and Exodus. Is that the Lord provides for those in need. There's an interesting couple verses.

[18:41] If you have Exodus. Or if you can turn to Exodus. Go ahead and do that. And put your finger at Exodus 12. 35.

And so, in our story of Ezra, you know, King Cyrus says, you can go. Go rebuild the temple. And along with that, all of the neighbors provided them goods and precious metals and animals.

And King Cyrus gave a bunch of stuff to them. The Israelites were in need. Right? They were in need to make them sure they trek back. They were in need to kind of set up the temple again.

And there was a need. The same need was there for the Israelites when they were leaving Egypt. And, you know, the tenth and final plague had just happened.

Right? The firstborn sons were killed. And Pharaoh had just lost his son. And finally he's like, okay, go. And it was a really tense situation.

[19:42] This back and forth with Moses asking to leave. And this is a really interesting couple verses that I had not seen before. But if you look at Exodus 12.35. It says, the people of Israel had also done as Moses told them.

For they had asked the Egyptians for silver and gold jewelry and for clothing. This is for their trek out of Egypt. So this is kind of, to me it sounds like salt on the wound.

Right? Finally, King Pharaoh's like, go. Just get out of here. Hey, I got one more question. Can we have some of that gold and some of that silver over there? And the Lord showed favor.

It says, and the Lord had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians. So that they let them have what they asked. Thus, they plundered the Egyptians. That's interesting, isn't it?

So my point here is just simple. The Lord provides for our needs.

[20:44] And as it relates to us, I often think about myself. And I would challenge you with this question. How do you respond to help? How do you respond to help?

When someone offers help, is your first response, no, it's all right. I got it. It can be often a very prideful one. Or when someone doesn't ask you, but you need the help.

How hard is it sometimes to ask for that? Here, the Lord obviously provides for the needs of his people. And here, as a body of Christ, it says in Galatians 6 that we're to carry each other's burdens.

To help one another. And I'm not saying it's just always physical needs. Maybe it's an emotional need. Or maybe it's a spiritual need. Accountability. Encouragement. Someone to just talk with. Someone to just talk with. Whatever it may be. The church can and should serve this purpose. Of really helping in some of these needs. And I think the church here does a great job of that.

[21:50] And I would just encourage us to continue to keep your eye out for those in need. But for the recipient, put the pride aside. Put the pride aside. Don't, you know.

If you need help, admit that. Ask someone. So, moving on to the third point. And I'll keep this one very brief. Because it's not mentioned in these seven verses.

And I don't want to encroach on a future brother's message here. But it's a very obvious one.

There's a similarity between Ezra, the Count Ezra, and the Count Exodus. And that is that the Lord's people, the Jews, they fall back into sin.

Right? They fall back into sin. The Lord blesses them. The Lord delivers them. The Lord brings them out of their captivity. And what do they do? They fall back into sin. In the case of Ezra, I'll mention it just briefly.

Their sin was intermarrying with foreigners that God had told them not to do. With the story of the Jews leaving Egypt and wandering through the desert, there's countless examples of that.

[22:50] Right? Which, to me, makes the story of Exodus so relatable. Do you feel like that? Maybe the Lord gives you, he blesses you with something. You enjoy that blessing. You forget.

You fall into sin. Hopefully there's repentance and restoration. And then there's just kind of this repeat. And it just feels sometimes like life can be like that. You think about when Moses, in Exodus, goes to Mount Sinai.

Right? He's in the desert. He goes to Mount Sinai. And he's speaking directly with the Lord. And the Lord gives him the Ten Commandments and instructs him on a bunch of other things. It's a big chunk of the book of Exodus.

And so you would think if you're Moses, you're coming back down to the people. And they have to be excited to hear what God has to say to you or had to say to you. Maybe a little bit of a welcome party because he's gone for quite some time.

What does Moses see when he gets down to the bottom? He sees his boy Aaron collecting all the gold to put together to make a statue to a golden calf.

[23:51] It's like the Lord says, you have turned aside so quickly. I've just delivered you out of captivity.

I've just delivered you out of Egypt. I've given you food. I've given you everything you've needed. I've given you protection. And you turn away. And to me, how much more relatable can that be?

Right? When we see that, I see that in my own life. The walk with the Lord has not always, from my experience, been smooth sailing.

There are times where there are struggles and there's sin. And there's going back to the Lord to repent. It can be a tough thing.

But to know that the Heavenly Father loves His children and wants that close relationship with us, that leads me to my final point.

[24:49] And that is, why does the Lord do all of this? Why does the Lord seek a relationship with us?

Why does the Lord seek us as believers to walk with Him? Why does the Lord stir in the hearts of Cyrus? And why did He harden Pharaoh's heart? And why is He doing everything that He's directly doing?

It's so obvious that He's in complete control in this passage in Ezra. But why? What's the purpose of all that? And again, this is where history, looking at kind of a similar parallel passage, really helps understand that.

And I would say this one thing. The Lord is doing all this for the singular purpose of bringing glory to His name.

Bringing glory to His name. You know, in Ezra, the Lord orchestrates this, through this unprecedented stirring of King Cyrus' heart, this foreign king.

[25:50] He orchestrates the release of the Jewish people back to their homeland. For what reason? To build a temple.

To worship Him. To bring Him glory. If you want to look at one last passage in Exodus 14, and then we'll wrap it up. So, the beginning of Exodus 14, and to give you some context here, the Jewish people had left Egypt.

They were on their way out, and Pharaoh suddenly wakes up, and he's like, what have I just done? I'm not going to let these people go.

I'm going to go after them. And so, he's going after them, and almost literally, the Israelites' backs were up against the wall of the Red Sea.

And they can see the Egyptians coming in after them. Again, this is another example of the Lord directly interceding, hardening Pharaoh's heart for one purpose, which we'll see here in a second.

[27:08] So, just to read along, it says in Exodus 14, Then the Lord said to Moses, Tell the people of Israel to turn back and encamp in front of Pi-Haharath, between Migdal and the sea, in front of Baal-Zaphon.

You shall encamp facing it by the sea. For Pharaoh will say of the people of Israel, They are wandering in the land. The wilderness has shut them in.

And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them. So, just again, another direct intervention from the Lord, hardening Pharaoh's heart for the purpose of them pursuing his own people.

Okay? Seems a little odd at this point. And I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his hosts. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord.

And they did so. As we know the story, that the Red Sea is parted. The Jewish people make it across. The Egyptians try to follow. And the water comes together.

[28:20] Why did he do all this? So that he would get glory over Pharaoh. And that the Egyptians should know that he is the Lord.

And they did so. If the musicians want to come on up, we'll just wrap it up here with this. If there's any doubt in one's mind, I think this settles it.

The Lord God is seeking his glory. And as I mentioned in the first point, the Lord directly impacts the hearts and lives of people today. He's not doing this because he's lonely and he needs a friend and he wants companionship.

The Lord is doing this because he is seeking his glory. When an unbeliever puts their trust in the gospel and realizes that there is nothing that they can do to get to heaven.

And they put their trust in the finished work of the cross. That glorifies the Lord. When a believer is walking with the Lord.

[29:30] That brings him glory. That is worship. You know, as we meet here this morning. And we study God's word. And we fellowship.

And we take the bread and cup. And we study God's word. That is worship. That brings glory to the Lord. With their backs up against the wall of the Red Sea.

And with the situation looking hopeless. The Lord says, I will get glory. And they shall know that I am the Lord. The same with this passage in Ezra. The Lord delivered his people in a shocking way.

From the Persian Empire. Back to their homeland. For the purpose of rebuilding the temple. So that he could be brought glory. Let's pray. Lord, we just.

We thank you again for this passage. And just seeing how you worked. Lord, in these times. With these people. Your chosen people.

[30:36] And the way. Seeing how you delivered them, Lord. And brought them back. Delivered them out of captivity. For the purpose of bringing you glory. For the purpose of making your name known.

Lord, I pray that we would seek that. For our own lives. Here at Bethel. Here in 2018. Here in St. Louis. Lord, that. In what we do.

Lord, we seek to worship. And bring glory. And we just thank you for that. We pray that we can take. The good news of the gospel out. For that very purpose, Lord.

We just thank you for that. In Jesus name. Amen.