

Ezra: an Applied Overview

Stephen Dray

KEYWORDS: God's promises, faithfulness, Exodus, service, worship, discipline, community, self-sacrifice, Temple, burnt offering, enemies, opposition, victory, faith, law of God, teaching, conviction, renewal

Ezra 1

The Book of Ezra starts with 'and' (omitted in some versions of the Bible). This was as strange and ungrammatical way to start a new book as it would be today. Yet there is a reason for it since in the Hebrew bible the book of Daniel precedes Ezra. The 'and' thus tells us that *the two books of Ezra and Nehemiah begin to describe the fulfilment of God's promises to Daniel.*

For many years the people of Judah had been in exile in Babylon. They had been taken there by Nebuchadnezzar but the reason they were there was that God was punishing them for their repeated failure to live for him and his glory.

However, God had promised that they would return and Ezra begins (chapters 1-6) by showing how God was faithful to his promises: we are told of the return of the people, what awaited them, their attempt to rebuild the temple, the opposition that they faced which led to the cessation of the work and, finally, their rallying after 20 years and their completion of the work. The second part of the book (7-10) describes the beginning of Ezra's ministry over 60 years later.

- *The faithfulness of God to his word is especially stressed in chapter 1 (1, compare 2 Chronicles 36:20,21; Jeremiah 29:10).*
- *Still more remarkably, the very person predicted by name as the deliverer over 200 years before (Isaiah 44:28) is the one who accomplishes God's promises.*
- *Then there is the remarkable preservation of the Temple furnishings (9-11).*

In all this *God is seen as faithful and able to accomplish his purposes (even from a most unlikely direction)*, for who would have expected pagan Cyrus to have acted in the way that he did and reverse the policy of repatriation of conquered peoples which had so characterised all his predecessors?

One of the great lessons which the two books of Ezra and Nehemiah are intended to teach us is that *God really is in control even of the greatest nations and rulers* (Cyrus was like the presidents of Russia and the USA all rolled into one). His plans are not hindered by the greatest of men. He will do what he has promised. And this is true not only on the international level but also in your small corner and mine. He is faithful.

One of the most interesting things about this chapter is the way that *the return from Babylon is seen as being like the Exodus all over again.* 200 years earlier Isaiah had spoken of the deliverance from Babylon in language drawn from the

time when God used Moses to deliver the Israelites from Egypt (see Isaiah 43:14-21, 48:20-21). This same idea is picked up here. Thus, Verses 4,6 use words found in Exodus 12:35,36 and the words 'family heads' were used in the wilderness of the leaders of Israel. The return from Babylon is a new Exodus. *But if there are similarities there are also great differences which we are intended to reflect upon.*

- * *At the Exodus the people had been delivered and brought into Palestine where they formed an independent state. Here they have no political freedom (an experience which had caused the children of God to lose sight of their true missionary calling) but remain a distinct community within a great world empire. Their distinguishing marks are now the House of God, the Altar and the Book (see 3:1-6, 7-13 and chapters 7 and following.*
- * *At the Exodus all the people had come out of Egypt. Here only a very small remnant returned to Jerusalem whose hearts had been moved to do so by God.*
- * *Under Moses the people had been a potentially great military power, here they are simply a small group whose great concern is faithful service of God.*

There are important lessons for us to learn from all of this.

- *We are expected to live in such a way that we are distinguished from the world around by our devoted service to God (not by our odd habits and practices!).*
- *We are called to obedience to the word, worship of God (in our lives as much as when we meet together, Romans 12:1,2) and witness: for this was God's original intention in securing a people for himself and it remains his purpose for us.*

Ezra 2

Few people today get very excited about a list of names: a telephone directory is not what most of us have in mind when we want a good read! However, the long list of names contained within this chapter is not to be passed over in pursuit of more interesting reading. Rather, these verses are intended to teach us some very important lessons.

The people who returned to Palestine were few in number (42,000 plus slaves, 64): a small fragment of a once mighty nation which counted its population in millions. However, small though they were, they were given the full name of the 'people of Israel' (2) and like Israel of old they had twelve new leaders (2). Later they will offer the sacrifices appointed for all Israel (6:17). Thus, they are pictured as the true Israel, the remnant left after the harsh pruning process of the previous years. This process, predicted by the prophets, had exempted nobody. Thus, of the 24 priestly families who had gone into exile, only four remained (36) and even they outnumbered

the once far more numerous Levites (40).

However, *in the midst of judgement, these people had stood firm*. They remained *faithful to their past*, recalling their homes (3-35) *and through this saw the future dawn upon them as God fulfilled his promises* (1:1).

Today, in parts of the world, many churches are declining and becoming extinct, the judgement of God seems present everywhere. In the midst of all this, we are to hold fast to God and prayerfully long for the reappearing of his presence and blessing once more. Though it be delayed God will not fail us.

Yet *the people were not idle, wallowing in the hopelessness of their situation*. When the time came they were ready to leave the relative comforts of Babylon to return to the land where privation was the order of the day and considerable effort required to re-establish their presence in the land of promise. God did not do it all for them!

There is a lesson here for all of us. Too easily we give up and pass all the responsibility on to God: 'Its all his job', we say. But this is not the biblical picture. God is sovereign but, even in the most hopeless of situations, he expects us to do what we can. We cannot be idle.

What did the people who returned to Babylon do when faced with the huge problems they encountered on re-entering the land of Judah?

Unlike us, so often, *they did 'first things first' and devoted themselves to re-establishing securely the very foundations of the people of God*. Attention was given to the 'membership role' and to ensuring the purity and genuineness of those who professed to be true Israelites (62). This was no end in itself. Rather by this means the unity of God's people was established (3:1). United in mind and purpose there was hope that the work of reconstruction could be undertaken effectively.

There is a point at which loving tolerance of others in fellowship must end and discipline be brought into action. Indiscipline among the people of God destroys the fellowship of the church, saps its resolve and renders it powerless and ineffective. *Only a united fellowship, striving together, is able to successfully face the tremendous demands which challenge its life and growth*. The people who returned understood this. They did not treat symptoms but got back to first causes. Only then did they have any real hope of success.

We notice, too, their *great concern to establish a genuine community life when they returned*. As a group of isolated individuals all doing 'their own thing' they could achieve little. But organized together . . .the possibilities were enormous! We notice, then, that the people organized themselves into guilds, families etc. in order to complete the various tasks (some menial, others more honourable) required of them. Few fellowships today could be said to be characterised by single-minded co-operation in the LORD's work.

Finally, we notice that *these people were prepared to face the cost* (69). Their great concern was to see the symbol of God's presence among them (the Temple) rebuilt. To that end no effort was spared, no demand too great.

Unity, community and self-sacrifice remain the foundations upon which any successful work for God depends today. Are these things central to the aims of our churches, church or our individual lives? They ought to be or else little will be achieved by us for God.

Ezra 3

We have already seen that when the people of God returned from Babylon they had an enormous task to undertake (chapter 1). However, they set about ensuring that they did all that was humanly possible to achieve success (chapter 2). In this chapter the greatest aim of all is mentioned, together with the means to which this aim was achieved.

The great objective (7-13) was to see God's presence once again manifested in the midst of his people. The temple was the counterpart on earth of heaven itself, the place where God made himself known. The response of the people in verse 13 suggests that such an experience of his presence was, indeed, renewed and known by the people.

How, then, was this achieved? Significantly (1-6), we are told that *the people re-established the burnt offering and sought to apply God's will to the whole of their lives and their worship*.

The burnt offering (see Leviticus 1) was the central sacrifice in the worship of Old Testament times. It involved a recognition of sin and confession of that sin (Leviticus 1: 3,4), the transfer of sin to a substitute (1:4) and the entire destruction of the animal to symbolize that the anger of God against sin 'burnt itself out' on the substitute (1:9). From the offerer's point of view the sacrifice was costly and symbolized the offering of all that was best to God. It was *the response of radical obedience to God*. This indeed characterised the people who returned from the exile (2,4,10). But there was something else about the burnt offering. It was a sacrifice that the community of God had to make continually (Leviticus 6:8-13). *There was the need for constant confession and re-consecration*.

This understanding of the burnt offering seems to have characterised the people of Judah. Individually and together they cast themselves daily upon the mercy of God and re-consecrated themselves to his glory. And it was they who experienced the renewal described in verse 13.

Today the same truths are unchanged both for the individual and the community. Christ Jesus has offered a sacrifice once-for-all for our sin, but daily we are to come back to him in confession, seeking mercy and grace. Only such consecrated lives can expect to enjoy intimacy with God.

Ezra 4.

A brief history lesson is in order before we study this chapter, because although it doesn't take long to read, the events described here covered a period of 16 years! Rebuilding of the temple began in 534BC (about two years after the people first came back). However, it was stopped shortly afterwards (24) and not resumed until 520BC.

No work of the LORD goes unchallenged! Spiritual progress is achieved only in the heat of battle against powerful enemy forces. Thus,

- *No sooner had the people begun the work than they were surrounded by apparently insuperable problems* (4-5).
- Far from progress being made it seemed to be *a case of one step forward and two steps back* (23).
- Indeed, *for a long time* (sixteen years!) *it seemed as though the opponents of God's people had achieved complete victory*. What a thorough reverse after the climax of chapter 2!
Yet if we find this unexpected it only goes to show how

superficially we have read our Bibles. *The Christian life is a battle and immediate success is nowhere guaranteed.* We have to enter Christian service both forewarned and forearmed.

Several *different types of opposition* faced the returnees.

- There was the repeated temptation to *compromise* (1-3),
- There was discouragement and constant *frustration* (4,5)
- As well as unremitting opposition, there was *misrepresentation* (16) by powerful enemies who could be violent and destructive (23) and seldom was there only one problem at a time!
- There were also the *faint-hearted* among the people of God (compare Nehemiah 4:10) and
- There were those with *long memories of other battlefields* (Haggai 2:1ff.).

Doing a work for God is seldom easy. There are constant troubles to drain the strength of his workers. *The memory of the experience of his presence (2:13) has often to be carried into many deep and dark valleys.* Yet, as we shall see . . . the dark valley is never the end of the road.

It is imperative that we are realists. God is for us, but that does not mean that the path is free of thorns and thickets. Through suffering God brings his people to glory, just as he did with Jesus.

Ezra 5,6

Consecration to the LORD's service (chapter 3) provides no easy way to success (chapter 4). However, these two chapters show that *victory will be achieved by God's persevering people.*

The leaders and then, through them (5:1,2), the lesser leaders (6:14) and the people were aroused from defeat (4:24) by the prophetic ministries of the visionary Zechariah (see, especially chapter 4) and the practical Haggai (Ezra 5:1). Though outwardly the circumstances remained unchanged,

- *the work was resumed, by faith, in hard times* (Haggai 1:6-11),
- *continued amid the 'day of small things'* (Zechariah 4:10) and
- *amid constant threat and unabated opposition* (Ezra 5:3,4).
- *Yet it was concluded in remarkably quick time* (4 years, 6:13ff.).

In hindsight, it is clear that God was in control (5:5) and that behind the 'frowning providence' (5:3) God allowed renewed opposition in order to give fresh impetus for the work and to evoke fresh faith and courage (5:4ff.). Moreover, in the end the enemies overstretched themselves and were utterly defeated (6:3-12) as all the benefits of state protection and help were offered with no strings attached (6:8ff.)!

These two chapters are full of instructive lessons for us today. Many of us feel exhausted and powerless in the face of the prolonged heat of the battle. We are discouraged and defeated and the situation remains as bad as ever. What should we do?

The answer is that, once again, *we need to hear God's word: its visions, promises and practical programmes. We need to learn to labour in faith (not sight), confident that the victory will, at length, be ours. Our present dark days will prove to be part of God's plan and purpose in equipping us and overthrowing our*

foes. When victory comes it may come with unexpected suddenness.

Ezra 7,8

Something very strange happens at 7:1! We are introduced to events which took place sixty years later when Ezra came back to Jerusalem (458 BC). Why? Chapter 6 certainly left us on a 'high' with the temple re-built and re-consecrated. However, *the author of Ezra hastens on to describe the great scribe's ministry because only with him does the work of restoration arrive at its final, satisfying conclusion.* In particular, only then are the people set before us as an example of how the work of God is to be sustained.

A brief reading of these two chapters shows that *tremendous stress is placed upon Ezra's position as 'scribe' (7:5,10) and teacher of the 'Law' of God (7:14).* In the previous chapters Haggai and Zechariah had been active. However, with them (and Malachi) the completion of God's Old Testament revelation had taken place. This is why Ezra's teaching ministry is now stressed so much. The completion of the Old Testament revelation means that *the people are not to look for new words but to those who can teach the words God has already spoken.* Here, then, was a man who was:

- *adept in grasping the meaning of the Bible* (7:6),
- *wholly dedicated to the word* (7:10),
- *living out what he had learned* (7:10) and
- *given to instructing others* (8:15ff.).

Without such a ministry as foundational to the life of the people of God no continuing growth and success could be expected (8:15-20 and compare Nehemiah 8:7,8; 9:4). The Jews recognized this, for Ezra became a model for subsequent teaching ministries among them.

The lessons of these two chapters are vital today. No longer does God speak as he did through the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles. Just, then, as the Bible teaching ministry became the foundation stone of synagogue life so it must be the foundation on which church life is based. Both believer and, especially, teacher are to be 'people of the book', devoted to understanding and living out the message of God. Those with special teaching ability are to be highly treasured!

Ezra 9,10

Chapters 7,8 emphasized the importance of the teaching ministry among the people of God. The last two chapters make a proper climax by emphasizing the same point by describing its effects on one particular occasion.

Yet at first sight these two chapters appear unedifying, even shocking (except for 9:16-15, a lovely cameo of a man at prayer). *We need, then, to understand what is going on.* Ezra's expositions over five months (compare 8:13-33 with 10:16-17) quickly had an effect (9:1,2). Over one hundred people, even among those who had returned to Judah, realized they had disobeyed God in marrying unbelieving spouses (compare Exodus 34:11-16; Deuteronomy 7:1-6). This is the issue for in 6:21 believing non-Israelites were admitted to the people of God. Such conduct was seen to threaten the people of God with growing unfaithfulness (9:2). Steps were immedi-

ately taken (10:1-17), the details of which are obscure. The point, however, is clear: *teaching led to conviction and renewal.*

The importance of the teaching of God's word could hardly be more effectively taught. Its lessons are enduring. God has spoken in the Bible but it is very easy, even when we have received such mercy from God as these people (9:9), to forget its teaching or to fail to apply it to ourselves. Too easily we can fall into doing sinful things which undermine our own spiritual life and that of God's people. This is why the teaching of these two chapters is so relevant. *We need to be diligent Bible students and to seek good teaching from God's word since it is by this means that God, by his Spirit, brings his word force-*

fully upon our consciences, motivating us to remedial action. The Bible is the primary means that God has appointed for the conversion of sinners and the growth of his people. There is nothing so effective as a simple unfolding of the message and application of the Bible.

We need to rediscover this! We need to make time for our own study and to pray for our teachers that they are able to grasp and apply God's word to us. We, too, must be ready to come and to apply the Word. Ezra's ministry transformed individuals and a community. Unleashed, the Bible can do the same again today in you and me and those around us.